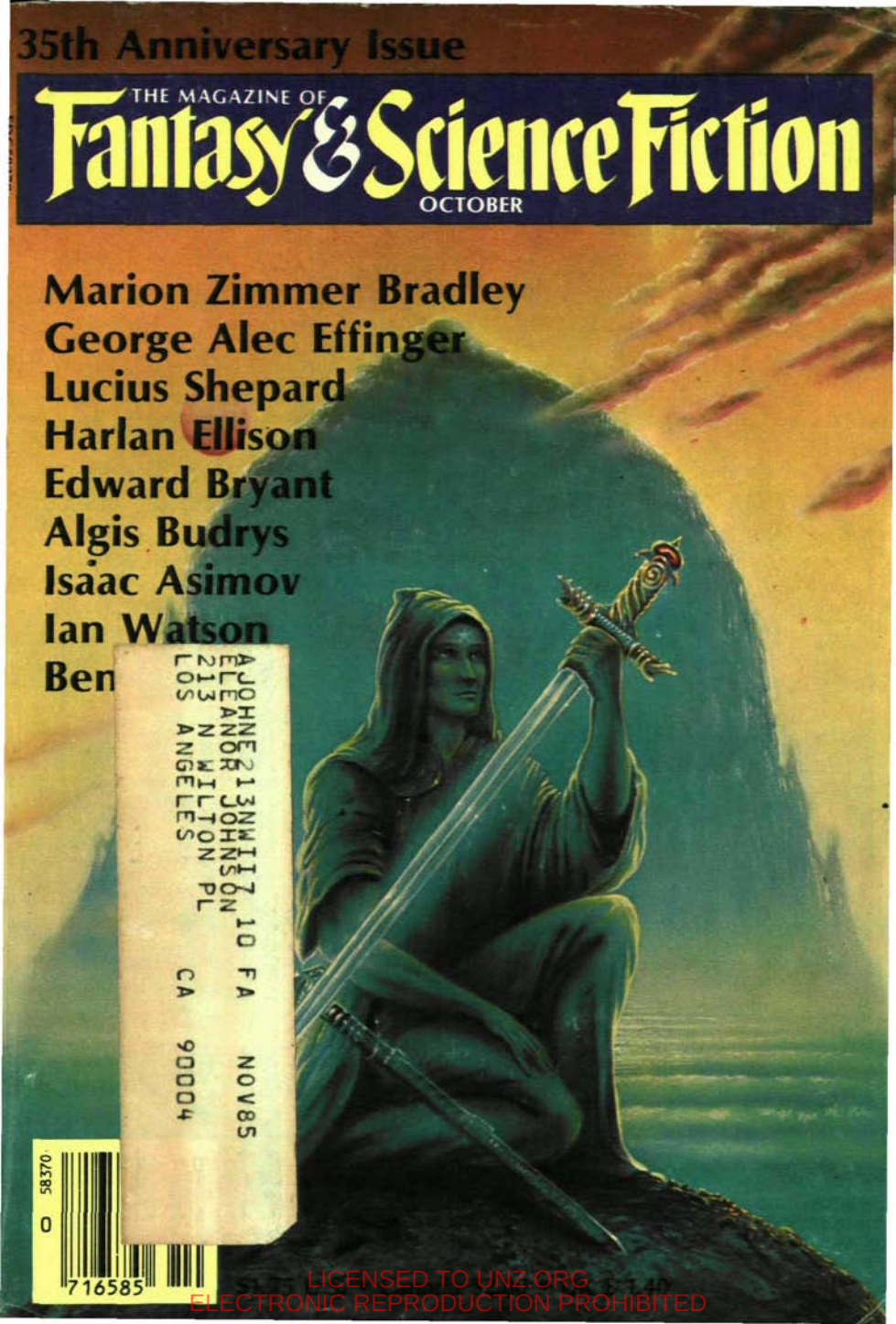
35th Anniversary Issue

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

Marion Zimmer Bradley
George Alec Effinger
Lucius Shepard
Harlan Ellison
Edward Bryant
Algis Budrys
Isaac Asimov
Ian Watson
Ben



A JOHNE213NWILT 10 FA NOV85
ELEANOR JOHNSON
213 N WILTON PL
LOS ANGELES CA 90004

0 58370 716585

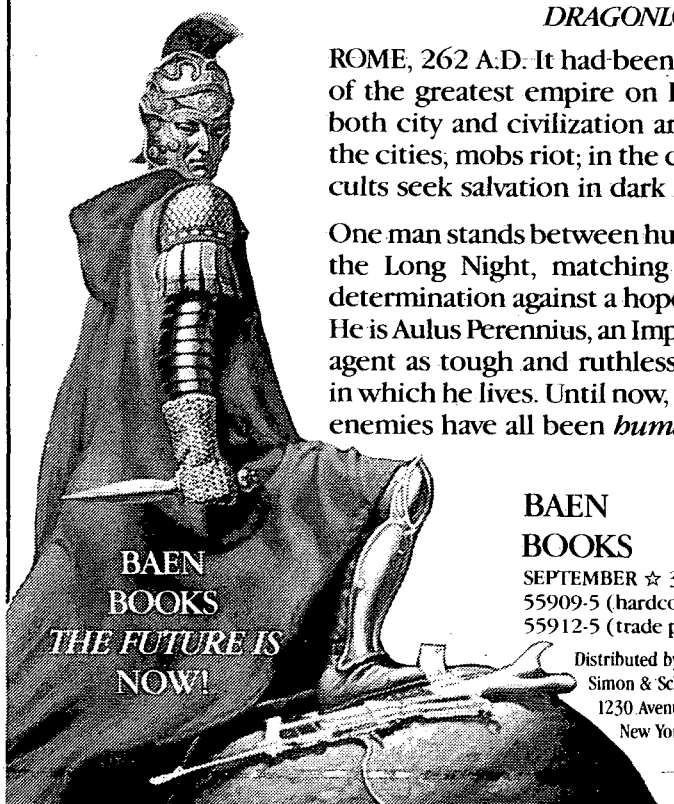
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Roman Courage Versus Alien Ferocity
in a Battle
of the Ages

Birds of Prey

By David Drake

BY THE AUTHOR OF
HAMMER'S SLAMMERS AND
DRAGONLORD



ROME, 262 A.D. It had been the capital of the greatest empire on Earth. Now both city and civilization are dying. In the cities, mobs riot; in the countryside, cults seek salvation in dark ritual.

One man stands between humanity and the Long Night, matching his savage determination against a hopeless future. He is Aulus Perennius, an Imperial secret agent as tough and ruthless as the age in which he lives. Until now, though, his enemies have all been *human*...

BAEN
BOOKS
THE FUTURE IS
NOW!

BAEN
BOOKS

SEPTEMBER ☆ 352 pp.
55909-5 (hardcover) ☆ $14.95
55912-5 (trade paper) ☆ $7.95

Distributed by Simon & Schuster
Simon & Schuster Building
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10020

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hugo Award-winner C.J. Cherryh has again written a science-fiction blockbuster.
"Satisfying and rewarding. Excellent."—*Analog*

C.J. CHERRYH

FORTY THOUSAND IN GEHENNA

"Set in the same future as DOWNBELOW STATION... this is a story on the classic theme of human underestimation of the alien. ...Cherryh tantalizes our minds with these enigmatic aliens, captures our hearts with her characters and involves us completely with her mix of broad and narrow views of a new culture's rise. Once again, Cherryh proves herself a consistently thoughtful and entertaining writer."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"One of the best of its type for years.... builds up an overwhelming sense of tension and of plans gone terribly wrong"—*British Fantasy Newsletter*

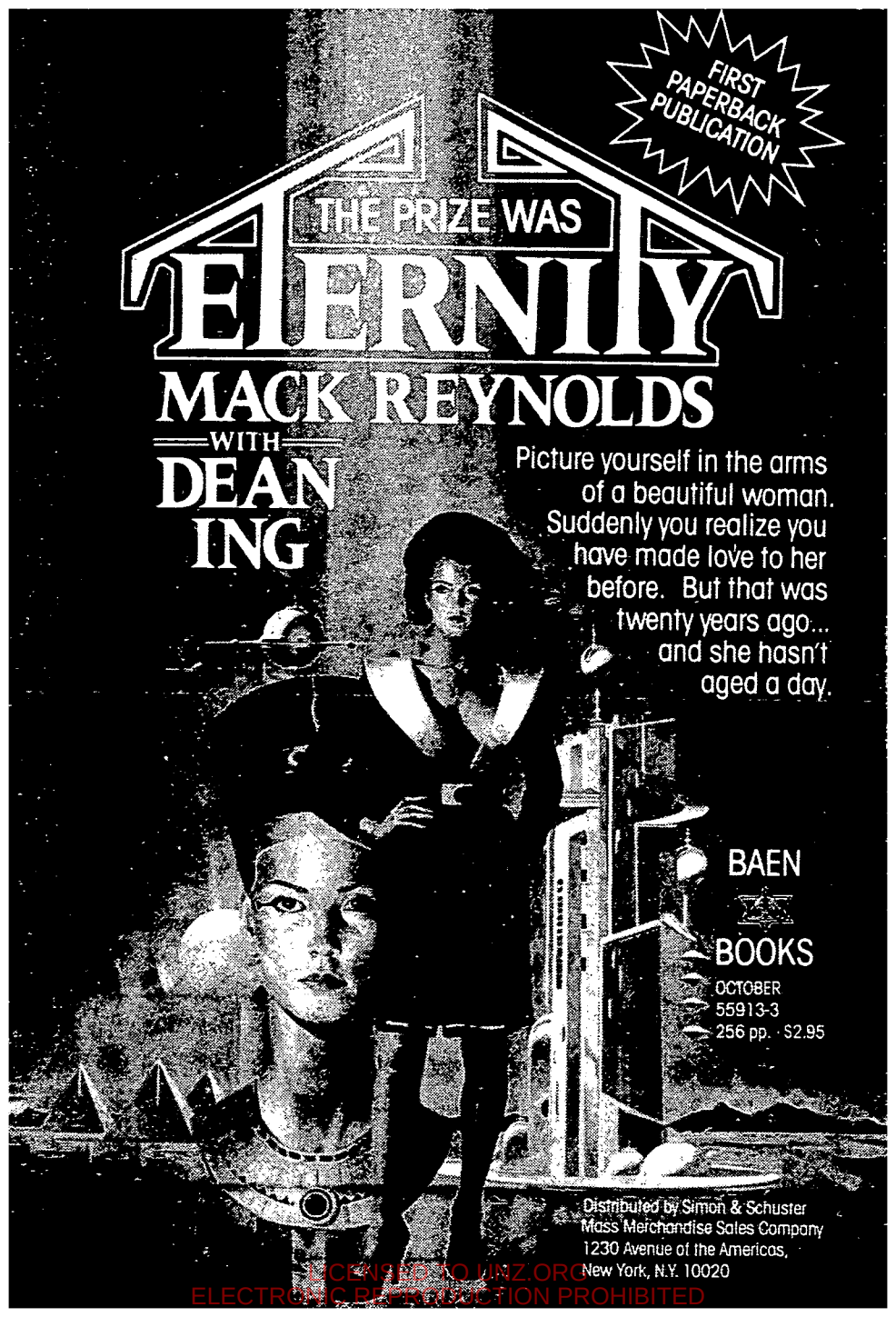
DAW SUPERSTAR
$3.50

The Exclusive Science Fiction and Fantasy Line Selected by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

DAW
SCIENCE FICTION

Distributed by NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


FIRST PAPERBACK PUBLICATION
THE PRIZE WAS
ETERNITY
MACK REYNOLDS
WITH
DEAN ING
Picture yourself in the arms of a beautiful woman. Suddenly you realize you have made love to her before. But that was twenty years ago... and she hasn't aged a day.
BAEN
BOOKS
OCTOBER
55913-3
256 pp. · $2.95
Distributed by Simon & Schuster
Mass Merchandise Sales Company
1230 Avenue of the Americas,
New York, N.Y. 10020

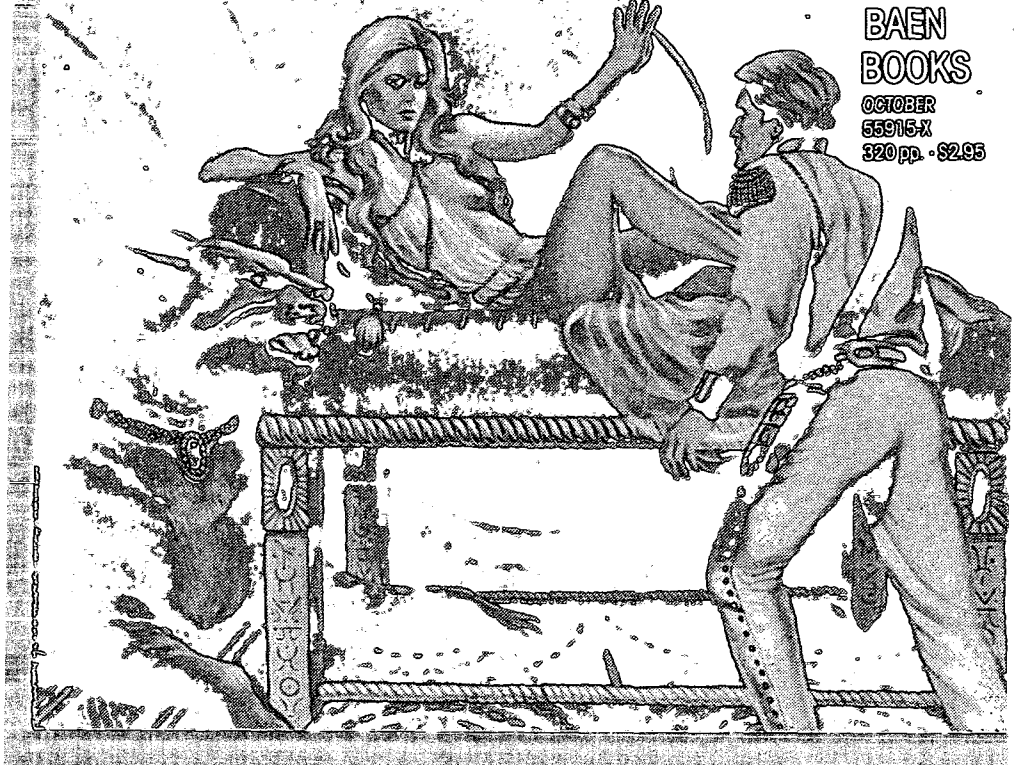
LICENSED TO LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Engrossing characters in a marvelous adventure." —C. Brown, LOCUS
"The amazing and erotic adventures of the most beautiful courtesan in tomorrow's universe."—Frederik Pohl

On a planet desperate for population, women hold the keys to power.
These are the adventures of Estri, Well-Keepress of Asfria,
The High Couch of Sillistra.

RETURNING CREATION

JANET MORRIS



BAEN BOOKS
OCTOBER
55915-X
320 pp. • $2.95

LICENSED TO LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

OCTOBER • 35th Anniversary Issue

NOVELETS

THE NIGHT OF WHITE BHAIRAB	8	**Lucius Shepard**
SOMEBODY ELSE'S MAGIC	101	**Marion Zimmer Bradley**

SHORT STORIES

THE MAN OF THE FUTURE	48	**Edward Bryant**
THE FLESH OF HER HAIR	62	**Ian Watson**
ISOLATION AREA	76	**Ben Bova**
THE ALIENS WHO KNEW, I MEAN, *EVERYTHING*	147	**George Alec Effinger**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	40	**Algis Budrys**
HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING	97	**Harlan Ellison**
SCIENCE: The Different Years Of The Universe	135	**Isaac Asimov**

CARTOONS: HENRY MARTIN (61), REX MAY (146)

COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "SOMEBODY ELSE'S MAGIC"

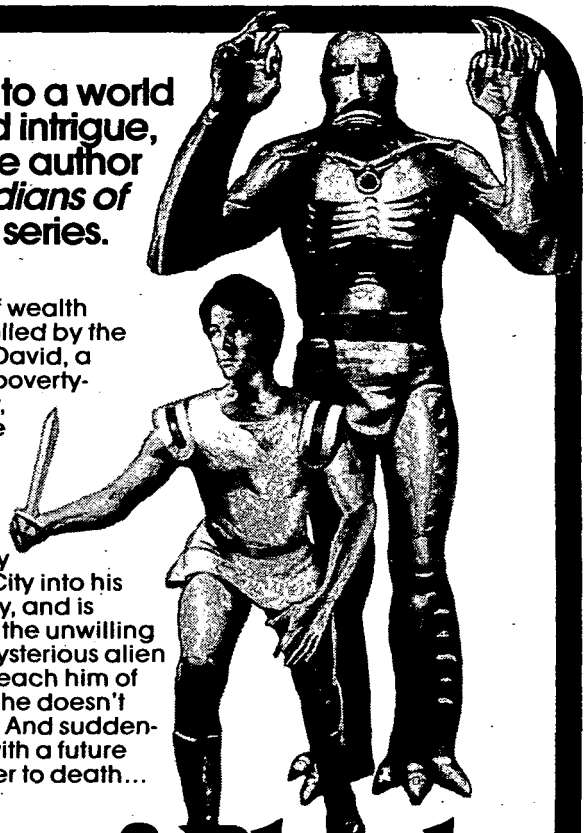
EDWARD L. FERMAN, Editor & Publisher — ISAAC ASIMOV, Science Columnist
DALE FARRELL, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Business Manager
ALGIS BUDRYS, Book Review Editor — ANNE JORDAN, Associate Editor
Assistant Editors: BECKY WILLIAMS, DAVID MICHAEL BUSKUS

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 67, No. 4, Whole No. 401, Oct. 1984. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $17.50; $19.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 20%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

Copyright © 1984 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Welcome to a world of action and intrigue, created by the author of the *Guardians of the Flame* series.



Elweré is the city of wealth and power, controlled by the privileged few. To David, a young thief in the poverty-stricken Lower City, it's the paradise he can never attain.

But when David poaches on forbidden territory, he turns the deadly boss of the Lower City into his implacable enemy, and is forced to become the unwilling apprentice of a mysterious alien —who alone can teach him of the special power he doesn't even know he has. And suddenly David is faced with a future that can lead either to death... *or the stars.*

Ties of Blood and Silver

A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL BY

Joel Rosenberg

John W. Campbell Award Nominee

$2.75

SIGNET SCIENCE FICTION

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lucius Shepard ("Salvador," April 1984) has evidently spent some time in Katmandu, and the Nepalese capital city is the setting for this wonderful story about a young American who arrives in Katmandu in search of enlightenment, only to fall in love and into a supernatural adventure.

The Night of White Bhairab

BY
LUCIUS SHEPARD

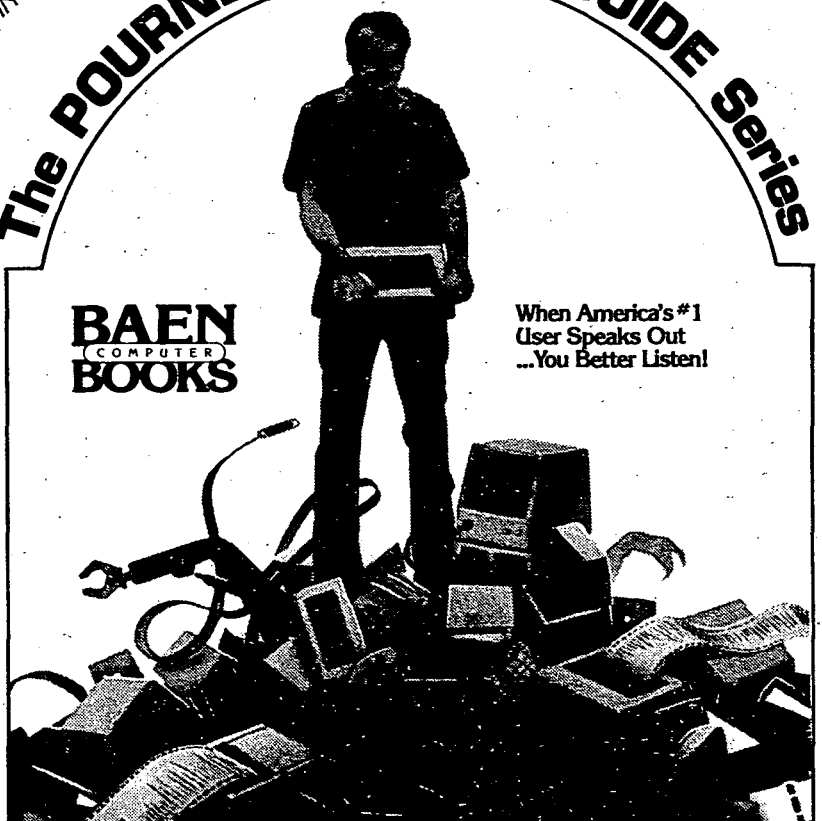
Whenever Mr. Chatterji went to Delhi on business, twice yearly, he would leave Eliot Blackford in charge of his Katmandu home, and prior to each trip, the transfer of keys and instructions would be made at the Hotel Anapurna. Eliot — an angular, sharp-featured man in his mid-thirties, with thinning blond hair and a perpetually ardent expression — knew Mr. Chatterji for a subtle soul, and he suspected that this subtlety had dictated the choice of meeting place. The Anapurna was the Nepalese equivalent of a Hilton, its bar equipped in vinyl and plastic, with a choir-like arrangement of bottles fronting the mirror. Lights were muted, napkins monogrammed. Mr. Chatterji, plump and prosperous in a business suit, would consider it an elegant refutation of Kipling's famous couplet ("East is East," etc.) that he was at home here, whereas Eliot, wearing a scruffy robe and sandals was not; he would argue that not only the twain met, they had actually exchanged places. It was Eliot's own measure of subtlety that restrained him from pointing out what Mr. Chatterji could not perceive: that the Anapurna was a skewed version of the American Dream. The carpeting was indoor-outdoor runner; the menu was rife with ludicrous misprints *(Skotch Miss, Screwdiver),* and the lounge act — two turbaned, tuxedoed Indians on electric guitar and traps — was managing to turn "Evergreen" into a doleful raga.

"There will be one important delivery." Mr. Chatterji hailed the waiter and nudged Eliot's shot glass forward. "It should have been here days ago, but you know these custom people." He gave an effeminate shud-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INTRODUCING

The POURNELLE USERS GUIDE Series



BAEN COMPUTER BOOKS

When America's #1 User Speaks Out ...You Better Listen!

POURNELLE USERS GUIDE #1

THE USERS GUIDE To Small Computers

by Jerry Pournelle

55908-7 • 352 pp. • $7.95

Every POURNELLE USERS GUIDE title must be personally approved and in most cases will be commissioned or acquired by none other than Jerry Pournelle – #1 columnist in BYTE Magazine!

Also From Baen Computer Books in October–
THE SMALL BUSINESS COMPUTER TODAY AND TOMORROW
by William E. Grieb, Jr.
55907-9 · 288 pp. · $6.95

BAEN BOOKS DISTRIBUTED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER
MASS MERCHANDISE SALES COMPANY 1230 Avenue of the Americas New York, N.Y. 10020

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

der to express his distaste for the bureaucracy, and cast an expectant eye on Eliot, who did not disappoint.

"What is it?" he asked, certain that it would be an addition to Mr. Chatterji's collection: he enjoyed discussing the collection with Americans; it proved that he had an overview of their culture.

"Something delicious!" said Mr. Chatterji. He took the tequila bottle from the waiter and — with a fond look — passed it to Eliot. "Are you familiar with the Carversville Terror?"

"Yeah, sure." Eliot knocked back another shot. "There was a book about it."

"Indeed," said Mr. Chatterji. "A best seller. The Cousineau mansion was once the most notorious haunted house of your New England. It was torn down several months ago, and I've succeeded in acquiring the fireplace, which" — he sipped his drink — "which was the locus of power. I'm very fortunate to have obtained it." He fitted his glass into the circle of moisture on the bar and waxed scholarly. "Aimée Cousineau was a most unusual spirit, capable of a variety of...."

Eliot concentrated on his tequila. These recitals never failed to annoy him, as did — for different reasons —the sleek Western disguise. When Eliot had arrived in Katmandu as a member of the Peace Corps, Mr. Chatterji had presented a far less pompous image: a scrawny kid dressed in Levi's that he had wheedled from a tourist. He'd been one of the hangers-on — mostly young Tibetans — who frequented the grubby tea rooms on Freak Street, watching the American hippies giggle over their hash yogurt, lusting after their clothes, their women, their entire culture. The hippies had respected the Tibetans: they were a people of legend, symbols of the occultism then in vogue, and the fact that they like James Bond movies, fast cars, and Jimi Hendrix had increased the hippies' self-esteem. But they had found laughable the fact that Ranjeesh Chatterji — another Westernized Indian — had liked these same things, and they had treated him with mean condescension. Now, thirteen years later, the roles had been reversed; it was Eliot who had become the hanger-on.

He had settled in Katmandu after his tour was up, his idea being to practice meditation, to achieve enlightenment. But it had not gone well. There was an impediment in his mind — he pictured it as a dark stone, a stone compounded of worldly attachments — that no amount of practice could wear down, and his life had fallen into a futile pattern. He would spend ten months of the year living in a small room near the temple of Swayambhunath, meditating, rubbing away at the stone; and then, during March and September, he would occupy Mr. Chatterji's house and debauch himself with liquor and sex and drugs. He was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aware that Mr. Chatterji considered him a burnout, that the position of caretaker was in effect a form of revenge, a means by which his employer could exercise his own brand of condescension; but Eliot minded neither the label nor the attitude. There were worse things to be than a burnout in Nepal. It was beautiful country, it was inexpensive, it was far from Minnesota (Eliot's home). And the concept of personal failure was meaningless here. You lived, died, and were reborn over and over until at last you attained the ultimate success of nonbeing: a terrific consolation for failure.

"... yet in your country," Mr. Chatterji was saying, "evil has a sultry character. Sexy! It's as if the spirits were adopting vibrant personalities in order to contend with pop groups and movie stars."

Eliot thought of a comment, but the tequila backed up on him and he belched instead. Everything about Mr. Chatterji — teeth, eyes, hair, gold rings — seemed to be gleaming with extraordinary brilliance. He looked as unstable as a soap bubble, a fat little Hindu illusion.

Mr. Chatterji clapped a hand to his forehead. "I nearly forgot. There will be another American staying at the house. A girl. Very shapely!" He shaped an hourglass in the air. "I'm quite mad for her, but I don't know if she's trustworthy. Please see she doesn't bring in any strays."

"Right," said Eliot. "No problem."

"I believe I will gamble now," said Mr. Chatterji, standing and gazing toward the lobby. "Will you join me?"

"No, I think I'll get drunk. I guess I'll see you in October."

"You're drunk already, Eliot." Mr. Chatterji patted him on the shoulder. "Hadn't you noticed?"

Early the next morning, hung over, tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, Eliot sat himself down for a final bout of trying to visualize the Avalokitesvara Buddha. All the sounds outside — the buzzing of a motor scooter, birdsong, a girl's laughter — seemed to be repeating the mantra, and the gray stone walls of his room looked at once intensely real and yet incredibly fragile, papery, a painted backdrop he could rip with his hands. He began to feel the same fragility, as if he were being immersed in a liquid that was turning him opaque, filling him with clarity. A breath of wind could float him out the window, drift him across the fields, and he would pass through the trees and mountains, all the phantoms of the material world ... but then a trickle of panic welled up from the bottom of his soul, from that dark stone. It was beginning to smolder, to give off poison fumes: a little briquette of anger and lust and fear. Cracks were spreading across the clear substance he had become, and if he didn't move soon, if he didn't break off the meditation,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he would shatter.

He toppled out of the lotus position and lay propped on his elbows. His heart raced, his chest heaved, and he felt very much like screaming his frustration. Yeah, that was a temptation. To just say the hell with it and scream, to achieve through chaos what he could not through clarity: to empty himself into the scream. He was trembling, his emotions flowing between self-hate and self-pity. Finally, he struggled up and put on jeans and a cotton shirt. He knew he was close to a breakdown, and he realized that he usually reached this point just before taking up residence at Mr. Chatterji's. His life was a frayed thread stretched tight between those two poles of debauchery. One day it would snap.

"The hell with it," he said. He stuffed the remainder of his clothes into a duffel bag and headed into town.

Walking through Durbar Square — which wasn't really a square but a huge temple complex interspersed with open areas and wound through by cobbled paths — always put Eliot in mind of his brief stint as a tour guide, a career cut short when the agency received complaints about his eccentricity ("... As you pick your way among the piles of human waste and fruit rinds, I caution you not to breathe too deeply of the divine afflatus; otherwise, it may forever numb you to the scent of Prairie Cove or Petitpoint Gulch or whatever citadel of gracious living it is that you call home....") It had irked him to have to lecture on the carvings and history of the square, especially to the just-plain-folks who only wanted a Polaroid of Edna or Uncle Jimmy standing next to that weird monkey god on the pedestal. The square was a unique place, and in Eliot's opinion, such unenlightened tourism demeaned it.

Pagoda-style temples of red brick and dark wood towered on all sides, their finials rising into brass lightning bolts. They were alien-looking — you half-expected the sky above them to be of an otherworldly color and figured by several moons. Their eaves and window screens were ornately carved into the images of gods and demons, and behind a large window screen on the temple of White Bhairab lay the mask of that god. It was almost ten feet high, brass, with a fanciful headdress and long-lobed ears and a mouth full of white fangs; its eyebrows were enameled red, fiercely arched, but the eyes had the goofy quality common to Newari gods — no matter how wrathful they were, there was something essentially friendly about them, and they reminded Eliot of cartoon germs. Once a year — in fact, a little more than a week from now — the screens would be opened, a pipe would be inserted into the god's mouth, and rice beer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would jet out into the mouths of the milling crowds; at some point a fish would be slipped into the pipe, and whoever caught it would be deemed the luckiest soul in the Katmandu Valley for the next year. It was one of Eliot's traditions to make a try for the fish, though he knew that it wasn't luck he needed.

Beyond the square, the streets were narrow, running between long brick buildings three and four stories tall, each divided into dozens of separate dwellings. The strip of sky between the roofs was bright, burning blue — a void color — and in the shade the bricks looked purplish. People hung out the windows of the upper stories, talking back and forth: an exotic tenement life. Small shrines — wooden enclosures containing statuary of stucco or brass — were tucked into wall niches and the mouths of alleys. The gods were everywhere in Katmandu, and there was hardly a corner to which their gaze did not penetrate.

On reaching Mr. Chatterji's, which occupied half a block-long building, Eliot made for the first of the interior courtyards; a stair led up from it to Mr. Chatterji's apartment, and he thought he would check on what had been left to drink. But as he entered the courtyard — a phalanx of jungly plants arranged around a lozenge of cement — he saw the girl and stopped short. She was sitting in a lawn chair, reading, and she was indeed very shapely. She wore loose cotton trousers, a T-shirt, and a long white scarf shot through with golden threads. The scarf and the trousers were the uniform of the young travelers who generally stayed in the expatriate enclave of Temal: it seemed that they all bought them immediately upon arrival in order to identify themselves to each other. Edging closer, peering between the leaves of a rubber plant, Eliot saw that the girl was doe-eyed, with honey-colored skin and shoulder-length brown hair interwoven by lighter strands. Her wide mouth had relaxed into a glum expression. Sensing him, she glanced up, startled; then she waved and set down her book.

"I'm Eliot," he said, walking over.

"I know. Ranjeesh told me." She stared at him incuriously.

"And you?" He squatted beside her.

"Michaela." She fingered the book, as if she were eager to get back to it.

"I can see you're new in town."

"How's that?"

He told her about the clothes, and she shrugged. "That's what I am," she said. "I'll probably always wear them." She folded her hands on her stomach: it was a nicely rounded stomach, and Eliot — a connoisseur of women's stomachs — felt the beginnings of arousal.

"Always?" he said. "You plan on being here that long?"

"I don't know." She ran a finger

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

along the spine of the book. "Ranjeesh asked me to marry him, and I said maybe."

Eliot's infant plan of seduction collaped beneath this wrecking ball of a statement, and he failed to hide his incredulity. "You're in love with Ranjeesh?"

"What's that got to with it?" A wrinkle creased her brow: it was the perfect symptom of her mood, the line a cartoonist might have chosen to express petulant anger.

"Nothing. Not if it doesn't have anything to do with it." He tried a grin, but to no effect. "Well," he said after a pause. "How do you like Katmandu?"

"I don't get out much," she said flatly.

She obviously did not want conversation, but Eliot wasn't ready to give up. "You ought to," he said. "The festival of Indra Jatra's about to start. It's pretty wild. Especially on the night of White Bhairab. Buffalo sacrifices, torchlight...."

"I don't like crowds," she said.

Strike two.

Eliot strained to think of an enticing topic, but he had the idea it was a lost cause. There was something inert about her, a veneer of listlessness redolent of Thorazine, of hospital routine. "Have you seen the Khaa?" he asked.

"The what?"

"The Khaa. It's a spirit ... though some people will tell you it's partly animal, because over here the animal and spirit worlds overlap. But whatever it is, all the old houses have one, and those that don't are considered unlucky. There's one here."

"What's it look like?"

"Vaguely anthropomorphic. Black, featureless. Kind of a living shadow. They can stand upright, but they roll instead of walk."

She laughed. "No, I haven't seen it. Have you?"

"Maybe," said Eliot. "I thought I saw it a couple of times, but I was pretty stoned."

She sat up straighter and crossed her legs; her breasts jiggled and Eliot fought to keep his eyes centered on her face. "Ranjeesh tells me you're a little cracked," she said.

Good ol' Ranjeesh! He might have known that the son of a bitch would have sandbagged him with his new lady. "I guess I am," he said, preparing for the brush-off. "I do a lot of meditation, and sometimes I teeter on the edge."

But she appeared more intrigued by this admission than by anything else he had told her; a smile melted up from her carefully composed features. "Tell me some more about the Khaa," she said.

Eliot congratulated himself. "They're quirky sorts," he said. "Neither good nor evil. They hide in dark corners, though now and then they're seen in the streets or in the fields out near Jyapu. And the oldest

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ones, the most powerful ones, live in the temples in Durbar Square. There's a story about the one here that's descriptive of how they operate ... if you're interested."

"Sure." Another smile.

"Before Ranjeesh bought this place, it was a guesthouse, and one night a woman with three goiters on her neck came to spend the night. She had two loaves of bread that she was taking home to her family, and she stuck them under her pillow before going to sleep. Around midnight the Khaa rolled into her room and was struck by the sight of her goiters rising and falling as she breathed. He thought they'd make a beautiful necklace, so he took them and put them on his own neck. Then he spotted the loaves sticking out from her pillow. They looked good, so he took them as well and replaced them with two loaves of gold. When the woman woke, she was delighted. She hurried back to her village to tell her family, and on the way, she met a friend, a woman, who was going to market. This woman had four goiters. The first woman told her what had happened, and that night the second woman went to the guesthouse and did exactly the same things. Around midnight the Khaa rolled into her room. He'd grown bored with his necklace, and he gave it to the woman. He'd also decided that bread didn't taste very good, but he still had a loaf and he figured he'd give it another chance. So in exchange for the necklace, he took the woman's appetite for bread. When she woke, she had seven goiters, no gold, and she could never eat bread again the rest of her life."

Eliot had expected a response of mild amusement, and had hoped that the story would be the opening gambit in a game with a foregone and pleasurable conclusion; but he had not expected her to stand, to become walled off from him again.

"I've got to go," she said, and with a distracted wave, she made for the front door. She walked with her head down, hands thrust into her pockets, as if counting the steps.

"Where are you going?" called Eliot, taken back.

"I don't know. Freak Street, maybe."

"Want some company?"

She turned back at the door. "It's not your fault," she said, "but I don't really enjoy your company."

Shot down!

Trailing smoke, spinning, smacking into the hillside, and blowing up into a fireball.

Eliot didn't understand why it had hit him so hard. It had happened before, and it would again. Ordinarily he would have headed for Temal and and pair of cotton trousers, one less found himself another long white scarf morbidly self-involved (that, in retro-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spect, was how he characterized Michaela), one who would help him refuel for another bout of trying to visualize Avalokitesvara Buddha. He did, in fact, go to Temal; but he merely sat and drank tea and smoked hashish in a restaurant, and watched the young travelers pairing up for the night. Once he caught the bus to Patan and visited a friend, an old hippie pal named Sam Chipley who ran a medical clinic; once he walked out to Swayambhunath, close enough to see the white dome of the stupa, and atop it, the gilt structure on which the all-seeing eyes of Buddha were painted: they seemed squinty and mean-looking, as if taking unfavorable notice of his approach. But mostly over the next week he wandered through Mr. Chatterji's house, carrying a bottle, maintaining a buzz, and keeping an eye on Michaela.

The majority of the rooms were unfurnished, but many bore signs of recent habitation: broken hash pipes, ripped sleeping bags, empty packets of incense. Mr. Chatterji let travelers — those he fancied sexually, male and female — use the rooms for up to months at a time, and to walk through them was to take a historical tour of the American counterculture. The graffiti spoke of concerns as various as Vietnam, the Sex Pistols, women's lib, and the housing shortage in Great Britain, and also conveyed personal messages: "Ken Finkel please get in touch with me at Am. Ex. in Bangkok ... love Ruth." In one of the rooms was a complicated mural depicting Farah Fawcett sitting on the lap of a Tibetan demon, throttling his barbed phallus with her fingers. It all conjured up the image of a moldering, deranged milieu. Eliot's milieu. At first the tour amused him, but eventually it began to sour him on himself, and he took to spending more and more time on a balcony overlooking the courtyard that was shared with the connecting house, listening to the Newari women sing at their chores and reading books from Mr. Chatterji's library. One of the books was titled *The Carversville Terror*.

"... bloodcurdling, chilling...." said the *New York Times* on the front flap. "... the Terror is unrelenting...." commented Stephen King. "... riveting, gut-wrenching, mind-bending horror...." gushed *People* magazine. In neat letters, Eliot appended his own blurb: "... piece of crap...." The text — written to be read by the marginally literate — was a fictionalized treatment of purportedly real events, dealing with the experiences of the Whitcomb family, who had attempted to renovate the Cousineau mansion during the sixties. Following the usual buildup of apparitions, cold spots, and noisome odors, the family — Papa David, Mama Elaine, young sons Tim and Randy, and teenage Ginny — had met to discuss the situation.

... even the kids, thought David,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had been aged by the house. Gathered around the dining room table, they looked like a company of the damned — haggard, shadows under their eyes, grim-faced. Even with the windows open and the light streaming in, it seemed there was a pall in the air that no light could dispel. Thank God the damned thing was dormant during the day!

"Well," he said, "I guess the floor's open for arguments."

"I wanna go home!" Tears sprang from Randy's eyes, and on cue, Tim started crying, too.

"It's not that simple," said David. "This *is* home, and I don't know how we'll make it if we do leave. The savings account is just about flat."

"I suppose I could get a job," said Elaine unenthusiastically.

"I'm not leaving!" Ginny jumped to her feet, knocking over her chair. "Every time I start to make friends, we have to move!"

"But Ginny!" Elaine reached out a hand to calm her. "You were the one...."

"I've changed my mind!" She backed away, as if she had just recognized them all to be mortal enemies. "You can do what you want, but I'm staying!" And she ran from the room.

"Oh, God," said Elaine wearily. "What's gotten into her?"

What had gotten into Ginny, what was in the process of getting into her and was the only interesting part of the book, was the spirit of Aimée Cousineau. Concerned with his daughter's behavior, David Whitcomb had researched the house and learned a great deal about the spirit. Aimée Cousineau, née Vuillemont, had been a native of St. Berenice, a Swiss village at the foot of the mountain known as the Eiger (its photograph, as well as one of Aimée — a coldly beautiful woman with black hair and cameo features — was included in the central section of the book). Until the age of fifteen, she had been a sweet, unexceptional child; however, in the summer of 1889, while hiking on the slopes of the Eiger, she had become lost in a cave.

The family had all but given up hope, when, to their delight — three weeks later — she had turned up on the steps of her father's store. Their delight was short-lived. This Aimée was far different from the one who had entered the cave. Violent, calculating, slatternly.

Over the next two years, she succeeded in seducing half the men of the village, including the local priest. According to his testimony, he had been admonishing her that sin was not the path to happiness, when she began to undress. "I'm wed to Happiness," she told him. "I've entwined my limbs with the God of Bliss and kissed the scaly thighs of Joy." Throughout the ensuing affair, she made cryptic comments concerning "the God below the mountain," whose soul was now forever joined to hers.

At this point the book reverted to the gruesome adventures of the Whitcomb family, and Eliot, bored, realiz-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing it was noon and that Michaela would be sunbathing, climbed to Mr. Chatterji's apartment on the fourth floor. He tossed the book onto a shelf and went out onto the balcony. His continued interest in Michaela puzzled him. It occurred to him that he might be falling in love, and he thought that would be nice. Though it would probably lead nowhere, love would be a good kind of energy to have. But he doubted this was the case. Most likely his interest was founded on some fuming product of the dark stone inside him. Simple lust. He looked over the edge of the balcony. She was lying on a blanket —her bikini top beside her — at the bottom of a well of sunlight: thin, pure sunlight like a refinement of honey spreading down and congealing into the mold of a little gold woman. It seemed her heat that was in the air.

That night Eliot broke one of Mr. Chatterji's rules and slept in the master bedroom. It was roofed by a large skylight mounted in a ceiling painted midnight blue. The normal display of stars had not been sufficient for Mr. Chatterji, and so he'd had the skylight constructed of faceted glass that multiplied the stars, making it appear that you were at the heart of a galaxy, gazing out between the interstices of its blazing core. The walls consisted of a photomural of the Khumbu Glacier and Chomolungma; and, bathed in the starlight, the mural had acquired the illusion of depth and chill mountain silence. Lying there, Eliot could hear the faint sounds of Indra Jatra: shouts and cymbals, oboes and drums. He was drawn to the sounds; he wanted to run out into the streets, become an element of the drunken crowds, be whirled through torchlight and delirium to the feet of an idol stained with sacrificial blood. But he felt bound to the house, to Michaela. Marooned in the glow of Mr. Chatterji's starlight, floating above Chomolungma and listening to the din of the world below, he could almost believe he was a bodhisattva awaiting a call to action, that his watchfulness had some purpose.

The shipment arrived late in the afternoon of the eighth day. Five enormous crates, each requiring the combined energies of Eliot and three Newari workmen to wrangle up to the third-floor room that housed Mr. Chatterji's collection. After tipping the men, Eliot — sweaty, panting — sat down against the wall to catch his breath. The room was about twenty-five feet by fifteen, but looked smaller because of the dozens of curious objects standing around the floor and mounted one above the other on the walls. A brass doorknob, a shattered door, a straight-backed chair whose arms were bound with a velvet rope to prevent anyone from sitting, a discolored sink, a mirror streaked by a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brown stain, a slashed lampshade. They were all relics of some haunting or possession, some grotesque violence, and there were cards affixed to them testifying to the details and referring those who were interested to materials in Mr. Chatterji's library. Sitting surrounded by these relics, the crates looked innocuous. Bolted shut, chest-high, branded with customs stamps.

When he had recovered, Eliot strolled around the room, amused by the care that Mr. Chatterji had squandered on his hobby; the most amusing thing was that no one except Mr. Chatterji was impressed by it: it provided travelers with a footnote for their journals. Nothing more.

A wave of dizziness swept over him — he had stood too soon — and he leaned against one of the crates for support. Jesus, he was in lousy shape! And then, as he blinked away the tangles of opaque cells drifting across his field of vision, the crate shifted. Just a little shift, as if something inside had twitched in its sleep. But palpable, real. He flung himself toward the door, backing away. A chill mapped every knob and articulation of his spine, and his sweat had evaporated, leaving clammy patches on his skin. The crate was motionless. But he was afraid to take his eyes off it, certain that if he did, it would release its pent-up fury.

"Hi," said Michaela from the doorway.

Her voice electrified Eliot. He let out a squawk and wheeled around, his hands outheld to ward of attack.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Goddamn!" he said. "Don't sneak up like that!" He remembered the crate and glanced back at it. "Listen, I was just locking...."

"I'm sorry," she repeated, and walked past him into the room. "Ranjeesh is such an idiot about all this," she said, running her hand over the top of the crate. "Don't you think?"

Her familiarity with the crate eased Eliot's apprehension. Maybe he had been the one who had twitched: a spasm of overstrained muscles. "Yeah, I guess."

She walked over to the straight-backed chair, slipped off the velvet rope, and sat down. She was wearing a pale brown skirt and a plaid blouse that made her look schoolgirlish. "I want to apologize about the other day," she said; she bowed her head, and the fall of her hair swung forward to obscure her face. "I've been having a bad time lately. I have trouble relating to people. To anything. But since we're living here together, I'd like to be friends." She stood and spread the folds of her skirt. "See? I even put on different clothes. I could tell the others offended you."

The innocent sexuality of the pose caused Eliot to have a rush of desire. "Looks nice," he said with forced casualness. "Why've you been having a bad time?"

She wandered to the door and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gazed out. "Do you really want to hear about it?"

"Not if it's painful for you."

"It doesn't matter," she said, leaning against the doorframe. "I was in a band back in the States, and we were doing O.K. Cutting an album, talking to record labels. I was living with the guitarist, in love with him. But then I had an affair. Not even an affair. It was stupid. Meaningless. I still don't know why I did it. The heat of the moment, I guess. That's what rock 'n' roll's all about, and maybe I was just acting out the myth. One of the other musicians told my boyfriend. That's the way bands are — you're friends with everyone, but never at the same time. See, I told this guy about the affair. We'd always confided. But one day he got mad at me over something. Something else stupid and meaningless." Her chin was struggling to stay firm; the breeze from the courtyard drifted fine strands of hair across her face. "My boyfriend went crazy and beat up my...." She gave a dismal laugh. "I don't know what to call him. My lover. Whatever. My boyfriend killed him. It was an accident, but he tried to run, and the police shot him."

Eliot wanted to stop her; she was obviously seeing it all again, seeing blood and police flashers and cold white morgue lights. But she was riding a wave of memory, borne along by its energy, and he knew that she had to crest with it, crash with it.

"I was out of it for a while. Dreamy. Nothing touched me. Not the funerals, the angry parents. I went away for months, to the mountains, and I started to feel better. But when I came home, I found that the musician who'd told my boyfriend had written a song about it. The affair, the killings. He'd cut a record. People were buying it, singing the hook when they walked down the street or took a shower. Dancing to it! They were dancing on blood and bones, humming grief, shelling out $5.98 for a jingle about suffering. Looking back, I realize I was crazy, but at the time everything I did seemed normal. More than normal. Directed, inspired. I bought a gun. A ladies' model, the salesman said. I remember thinking how strange it was that there were male and female guns, just like with electric razors. I felt enormous carrying it. I had to be meek and polite or else I was sure people would notice how large and purposeful I was. It wasn't hard to track down Ronnie —that's the guy who wrote the song. He was in Germany, cutting a second album. I couldn't believe it, I wasn't going to be able to kill him! I was so frustrated that one night I went down to a park and started shooting. I missed everything. Out of all the bums and joggers and squirrels, I hit leaves and air. They locked me up after that. A hospital. I think it helped, but...." She blinked, waking from a trance. "But I still feel so disconnected, you now?"

Eliot carefully lifted away the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strands of hair that had blown across her face and laid them back in place. Her smile flickered. "I know," he said. "I feel that way sometimes."

She nodded thoughtfully, as if to verify that she had recognized this quality in him.

They ate dinner in a Tibetan place in Temal; it had no name and was a dump with flyspecked tables and rickety chairs, specializing in water buffalo and barley soup. But it was away from the city center, which meant they could avoid the worst of the festival crowds. The waiter was a young Tibetan wearing jeans and a T-shirt that bore the legend *Magic Is The Answer;* the earphones of personal stereo dangled about his neck. The walls — visible through a haze of smoke — were covered with snapshots, most featuring the waiter in the company of various tourists, but a few showing an older Tibetan in blue robes and turquoise jewelry, carrying an automatic rifle; this was the owner, one of the Khampa tribesmen who had fought a guerrilla war against the Chinese. He rarely put in an appearance at the restaurant, and when he did, his glowering presence tended to dampen conversation.

Over dinner, Eliot tried to steer clear of topics that might unsettle Michaela. He told her about Sam Chipley's clinic, the time the Dalai Lama had come to Katmandu, the musicians at Swayambhunath. Cheerful, exotic topics. Her listlessness was such an inessential part of her that Eliot was led to chip away at it, curious to learn what lay beneath; and the more he chipped away, the more animated her gestures, the more luminous her smile became. This was a different sort of smile than she had displayed on their first meeting. It came so suddenly over her face, it seemed an autonomic reaction, like the opening of a sunflower, as if she were facing not you but the principle of light upon which you were grounded. It was aware of you, of course, but it chose to see past the imperfections of the flesh and know the perfected thing you truly were. It boosted your sense of worth to realize that you were its target, and Eliot — whose sense of worth was at low ebb — would have done pratfalls to sustain it. Even when he told his own story, he told it as a joke, a metaphor for American misconceptions of oriental pursuits.

"Why don't you quit it?" she asked. "The meditation, I mean. If it's not working out, why keep on with it?"

"My life's in perfect suspension," he said. "I'm afraid that if I quit practicing, if I change anything, I'll either sink to the bottom or fly off." He tapped his spoon against his cup, signaling for more tea. "You're not really going to marry Ranjeesh, are you?" he asked, and was surprised at the concern he felt that she actually might.

"Probably not." The waiter poured

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their tea, whispery drumbeats issuing from his earphones. "I was just feeling lost. You see, my parents sued Ronnie over the song, and I ended up with a lot of money — which made me feel even worse...."

"Let's not talk about it," he said.

"It's all right." She touched his wrist, reassuring, and the skin remained warm after her fingers had withdrawn. "Anyway," she went on, "I decided to travel, and all the strangeness ... I don't know. I was starting to slip away. Ranjeesh was a kind of sanctuary."

Eliot was vastly relieved.

Outside, the streets were thronged with festivalgoers, and Michaela took Eliot's arm and let him guide her through the crowds. Newar wearing Nehru hats and white trousers that bagged at the hips and wrapped tightly around the calves; groups of tourists, shouting and waving bottles of rice beer; Indians in white robes and saris. The air was spiced with incense, and the strip of empurpled sky above was so regularly patterned with stars that it looked like a banner draped between the roofs. Near the house, a wild-eyed man in a blue satin robe rushed past, bumping into them, and he was followed by two boys dragging a goat, its forehead smeared with crimson powder: a sacrifice.

"This is crazy!" Michaela laughed.

"It's nothing. Wait'll tomorrow night."

"What happens then?"

"The night of White Bhairab." Eliot put on a grimace. "You'll have to watch yourself. Bhairab's a lusty, wrathful sort."

She laughed again and gave his arm an affectionate squeeze.

Inside the house, the moon —past full, blank and golden — floated dead center of the square of night sky admitted by the roof. They stood close together in the courtyard, silent, suddenly awkward.

"I enjoyed tonight," said Michaela; she leaned forward and brushed his cheek with her lips. "Thank you," she whispered.

Eliot caught her as she drew back, tipped her chin, and kissed her mouth. Her lips parted, her tongue darted out. Then she pushed him away. "I'm tired," she said, her face tightened with anxiety. She walked off a few steps, but stopped and turned back. "If you want to ... to be with me, maybe it'll be all right. We could try."

Eliot went to her and took her hands. "I want to make love with you," he said, no longer trying to hide his urgency. And that *was* what he wanted: to make love. Not to ball or bang or screw or any other inelegant version of the act.

But it was not love they made.

Under the starlit blaze of Mr. Chatterji's ceiling, she was very beautiful, and at first she was very loving, moving with a genuine involvement; then abruptly, she quit moving altogether and turned her face to the pillow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Her eyes were glistening. Left alone atop her, listening to the animal sound of his breathing, the impact of his flesh against hers, Eliot knew he should stop and comfort her. But the months of abstinence, the eight days of wanting her, all this fused into a bright flare in the small of his back, a reactor core of lust that irradiated his conscience, and he continued to plunge into her, hurrying to completion. She let out a gasp when he withdrew, and curled up, facing away from him.

"God, I'm so sorry," she said, her voice cracked.

Eliot shut his eyes. He felt sickened, reduced to the bestial. It had been like two mental patients doing nasty on the sly, two fragments of people who together didn't form a whole. He understood now why Mr. Chatterji wanted to marry her: he planned to add her to his collection, to enshrine her with the other splinters of violence. And each night he would complete his revenge, substantiate his cultural overview, by making something less than love with this sad, inert girl, this American ghost. Her shoulders shook with muffled sobs. She needed someone to console her, to help her find her own strength and capacity for love. Eliot reached out to her, willing to do his best. But he knew it shouldn't be him.

Several hours later, after she had fallen asleep, unconsolable, Eliot sat in the courtyard, thoughtless, dejected, staring at a rubber plant. It was mired in shadow, its leaves hanging limp. He had been staring for a couple of minutes when he noticed that a shadow in back of the plant was swaying ever so slightly; he tried to make it out, and the swaying subsided. He stood. The chair scraped on the concrete, sounding unnaturally loud. His neck prickled, and he glanced behind him. Nothing. Ye Olde Mental Fatigue, he thought. Ye Olde Emotional Strain. He laughed, and the clarity of the laugh — echoing up through the empty well — alarmed him; it seemed to stir little flickers of motion everywhere in the darkness. What he needed was a drink! The problem was how to get into the bedroom without waking Michaela. Hell, maybe he should wake her. Maybe they should talk more before what had happened hardened into a set of unbreakable attitudes.

He turned toward the stairs ... and then, yelling out in panic, entangling his feet with the lawn chairs as he leaped backward midstep, he fell onto his side. A shadow — roughly man-shaped and man-sized — was standing a yard away; it was undulating the way a strand of kelp undulates in a gentle tide. The patch of air around it was rippling, as if the entire image had been badly edited into reality. Eliot scrambled away, coming to his knees. The shadow melted downward, puddling on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cement; it bunched in the middle like a caterpillar, folded over itself, and flowed after him: a rolling sort of motion. Then it reared up, again assuming its manlike shape, looming over him.

Eliot got to his feet, still frightened, but less so. If he had previously been asked to testify as to the existence of the Khaa, he would have rejected the evidence of his bleared senses and come down on the side of hallucination, folktale. But now, though he was tempted to draw that same conclusion, there was too much evidence to the contrary. Staring at the featureless black cowl of the Khaa's head, he had a sense of something staring back. More than a sense. A distinct impression of personality. It was as if the Khaa's undulations were producing a breeze that bore its psychic odor through the air. Eliot began to picture it as a loony, shy old uncle who liked to sit under the basement steps and eat flies and cackle to himself, but who could tell when the first frost was due and knew how to fix the tail on your kite. Weird, yet harmless. The Khaa stretched out an arm: the arm just peeled away from its torso, its hand a thumbless black mitten. Eliot edged back. He wasn't quite prepared to believe it was harmless. But the arm stretched farther than he had thought possible and enveloped his wrist. It was soft, ticklish, a river of furry moths crawling over his skin.

In the instant before he jumped away, Eliot heard a whining note inside his skull, and that whining — seeming to flow through his brain with the same suppleness that the Khaa's arm had displayed — was translated into a wordless plea. From it he understood that the Khaa was afraid. Terribly afraid. Suddenly it melted downward and went rolling, bunching, flowing up the stairs; it stopped on the first landing, rolled halfway down, then up again, repeating the process over and over. It came clear to Eliot *(Oh, Jesus! This is nuts!)* that it was trying to convince him to follow. Just like Lassie or some other ridiculous TV animal, it was trying to tell him something, to lead him to where the wounded forest ranger had fallen, where the nest of baby ducks was being threatened by the brush fire. He should walk over, rumple its head, and say, "What's the matter, girl? Those squirrels been teasing you?" This time his laughter had a sobering effect, acting to settle his thoughts. One likelihood was that his experience with Michaela had been sufficient to snap his frayed connection with consensus reality; but there was no point in buying that. Even if that were the case, he might as well go with it. He crossed to the stairs and climbed toward the rippling shadow on the landing.

"O.K., Bongo," he said. "Let's see what's got you so excited."

• • •

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the third floor, the Khaa turned down a hallway, moving fast, and Eliot didn't see it again until he was approaching the room that housed Mr. Chatterji's collection. It was standing beside the door, flapping its arms, apparently indicating that he should enter. Eliot remembered the crate.

"No, thanks," he said. A drop of sweat slid down his rib cage, and he realized that it was unusually warm next to the door.

The Khaa's hand flowed over the doorknob, enveloping it, and when the hand pulled back, it was bulging, oddly deformed, and there was a hole through the wood where the lock mechanism had been. The door swung open a couple of inches. Darkness leaked out of the room, adding an oily essence to the air. Eliot took a backward step. The Khaa dropped the lock mechanism — it materialized from beneath the black, formless hand and clattered to the floor — and latched onto Eliot's arm. Once again he heard the whining, the plea for help, and, since he did not jump away, he had a clearer understanding of the process of translation. He could feel the whining as a cold fluid coursing through his brain, and as the whining died, the message simply appeared — the way an image might appear in a crystal ball. There was an undertone of reassurance to the Khaa's fear, and though Eliot knew this was the mistake people in horror movies were always making, he reached inside the room and fumbled for the wall switch, half-expecting to be snatched up and savaged. He flicked on the light and pushed the door open with his foot.

And wished that he hadn't.

The crates had exploded. Splinters and shards of wood were scattered everywhere, and the bricks had been heaped at the center of the room. They were dark red, friable bricks like crumbling cakes of dried blood, and each was marked with black letters and numbers that signified its original position in the fireplace. But none were in their proper position now, though they were quite artfully arranged. They had been piled into the shape of a mountain, one that — despite the crudity of its building blocks — duplicated the sheer faces and chimneys and gentle slopes of a real mountain. Eliot recognized it from its photograph. The Eiger. It towered to the ceiling, and under the glare of the lights, it gave off a radiation of ugliness and barbarity. It seemed alive, a fang of dark red meat, and the charred smell of the bricks was like a hum in Eliot's nostrils.

Ignoring the Khaa, who was again flapping its arms, Eliot broke for the landing; there he paused, and after a brief struggle between fear and conscience, he sprinted up the stairs to the bedroom, taking them three at a time. Michaela was gone! He stared at the starlit billows of the sheets. Where the hell ... her room! He hurtled down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the stairs and fell sprawling on the second-floor landing. Pain lanced through his kneecap, but he came to his feet running, certain that something was behind him.

A seam of reddish orange light — not lamplight — edged the bottom of Michaela's door, and he heard a crispy, chuckling in a hearth. The wood was warm to the touch. Eliot's hand hovered over the doorknob. His heart seemed to have swelled to the size of a basketball and was doing a fancy dribble against his chest wall. The sensible thing to do would be to get out quick, because whatever lay beyond the door was bound to be too much for him to handle. But instead he did the stupid thing and burst into the room.

His first impression was that the room was burning, but then he saw that though the fire looked real, it did not spread; the flames clung to the outlines of things that were themselves unreal, that had no substance of their own and were made of the ghostly fire: belted drapes, an overstuffed chair and sofa, a carved mantelpiece, all of antique design. The actual furniture — production-line junk — was undamaged. Intense reddish orange light glowed around the bed, and at its heart lay Michaela. Naked, her back arched. Lengths of her hair lifted into the air and tangled, floating in an invisible current; the muscles of her legs and abdomen were coiling, bunching, as if she were shedding her skin. The crackling grew louder, and the light began to rise from the bed, to form into a column of even brighter light; it narrowed at the midpoint, bulged in an approximation of hips and breasts, gradually assuming the shape of a burning woman. She was faceless, a fiery silhouette. Her flickering gown shifted as with the movements of walking, and flames leaped out behind her head like windblown hair.

Eliot was pumped full of terror, too afraid to scream or run. Her aura of heat and power wrapped around him. Though she was within arm's length, she seemed a long way off, inset into a great distance and walking toward him down a tunnel that conformed exactly to her shape. She stretched out a hand, brushing his cheek with a finger. The touch brought more pain than he had ever known. It was luminous, lighting every circuit of his body. He could feel his skin crisping, cracking, fluids leaking forth and sizzling. He heard himself moan: a gush of rotten sound like something trapped in a drain.

Then she jerked back her hand, as if *he* had burned *her*.

Dazed, his nerves screaming, Eliot slumped to the floor and — through blurred eyes — caught sight of a blackness rippling by the door. The Khaa. The burning woman stood facing it a few feet away. It was such an uncanny scene, this confrontation of fire and darkness, of two supernatural

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

systems, that Eliot was shocked to alertness. He had the idea that neither of them knew what to do. Surrounded by its patch of disturbed air, the Khaa undulated; the burning woman crackled and flickered, embedded in her eerie distance. Tentatively, she lifted her hand; but before she could complete the gesture, the Khaa reached with blinding swiftness and its hand enveloped hers.

A shriek like tortured metal issued from them, as if some ironclad principle had been breached. Dark tendrils wound through the burning woman's arm, seams of fire striped the Khaa, and there was a high-pitched humming, a vibration that jarred Eliot's teeth. For a moment he was afraid that spiritual versions of antimatter and matter had been brought into conjunction, that the room would explode. But the hum was sheared off as the Khaa snatched back its hand: a scrap of reddish orange flame glimmered within it. The Khaa melted downward and went rolling out the door. The burning woman — and every bit of flame in the room — shrank to an incandescent point and vanished.

Still dazed, Eliot touched his face. It felt burned, but there was no apparent damage. He hauled himself to his feet, staggered to bed, and collapsed next to Michaela. She was breathing deeply, unconscious. "Michaela!" He shook her. She moaned, her head rolled from side to side. He heaved her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and crept out into the hall. Moving stealthily, he eased along the hall to the balcony overlooking the courtyard and peered over the edge ... and bit his lip to stifle a cry. Clearly visible in the electric blue air of the predawn darkness, standing in the middle of the courtyard, was a tall, pale woman wearing a white nightgown. Her black hair fanned across her back. She snapped her head around to stare at him, her cameo features twisted by a gloating smile, and that smile told Eliot everything he had wanted to know about the possibility of escape. Just try to leave, Aimée Cousineau was saying. Go ahead and try. I'd like that. A shadow sprang erect about a dozen feet away from her, and she turned to it. Suddenly there was a wind in the courtyard: a violent, whirling wind of which she was the calm center. Plants went flapping up into the well like leathery birds; pots shattered, and the shards flew toward the Khaa. Slowed by Michaela's weight, wanting to get as far as he could from the battle, Eliot headed up the stairs toward Mr. Chatterji's bedroom.

It was an hour later, an hour of peeking down into the courtyard, watching the game of hide-and-seek that the Khaa was playing with Aimée Cousineau, realizing that the Khaa was protecting them by keeping her busy ...

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it was then that Eliot remembered the book. He retrieved it from the shelf and began to skim through it, hoping to learn something helpful. There was nothing else to do. He picked up at the point of Aimée's rap about her marriage to Happiness, passed over the transformation of Ginny Whitcomb into a teenage monster, and found a second section dealing with Aimée.

In 1895 a wealthy Swiss-American named Armand Cousineau had returned to St. Berenice — his birthplace — for a visit. He was smitten with Aimée Vuillemont, and her family, seizing the opportunity to be rid of her, allowed Cousineau to marry Aimée and sail her off to his home in Carversville, New Hampshire. Aimée's taste for seduction had not been curbed by the move. Lawyers, deacons, merchants, farmers: they were all grist for her mill. But in the winter of 1905, she fell in love — obsessively, passionately in love — with a young schoolmaster. She believed that the schoolmaster had saved her from her unholy marriage, and her gratitude knew no bounds. Unfortunately, when the schoolmaster fell in love with another woman, neither did her fury. One night while passing the Cousineau mansion, the town doctor spotted a woman walking the grounds. "... a woman of flame, not burning but composed of flame, her every particular a fiery construct...." Smoke was curling from a window; the doctor rushed inside and discovered the schoolmaster wrapped in chains, burning like a log in the vast fireplace. He put out the small blaze spreading from the hearth, and on going back onto the grounds, he stumbled over Aimée's charred corpse.

It was not clear whether Aimée's death had been accidental, a stray spark catching on her nightgown, or the result of suicide; but it *was* clear that thereafter the mansion had been haunted by a spirit who delighted in possessing women and driving them to kill their men. The spirit's supernatural powers were limited by the flesh, but were augmented by immense physical strength. Ginny Whitcomb, for example, had killed her brother Tim by twisting off his arm, and then had gone after her other brother and her father, a harrowing chase that had lasted a day and a night: while in possession of a body, the spirit was not limited to nocturnal activity....

Christ!

The light coming through the skylight was gray.

They were safe!

Eliot went to the bed and began shaking Michaela. She moaned, her eyes blinked open. "Wake up!" he said. "We've got to get out!"

"What?" She batted at his hands. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" She swung her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

legs onto the floor, sitting with her head down, stunned by wakefulness; she stood, swayed, and said, "God, what did you do to me? I feel...." A dull, suspicious expression washed over her face.

"We have to leave." He walked around the bed to her. "Ranjeesh hit the jackpot. Those crates of his had an honest-to-God spirit packed in with the bricks. Last night it tried to possess you." He saw her disbelief. "You must have blanked out. Here." He offered the book. "This'll explain...."

"Oh, God!" she shouted. "What did you do? I'm all raw inside!" She backed away, eyes wide with fright.

"I didn't do anything." He held out his palms as if to prove he had no weapons.

"You raped me! While I was asleep!" She looked left, right, in a panic.

"That's ridiculous!"

"You must have drugged me or something! Oh, God! Go away!"

"I won't argue," he said. "We have to get out. After that you can turn me in for rape or whatever. But we're leaving, even if I have to drag you."

Some of her desperation evaporated, her shoulders sagged.

"Look," he said, moving closer. "I didn't rape you. What you're feeling is something that goddamn spirit did to you. It was...."

She brought her knee up into his groin.

As he writhed on the floor, curled up around the pain, Eliot heard the door open and her footsteps receding. He caught at the edge of the bed, hauled himself to his knees, and vomited all over the sheets. He fell back and lay there for several minutes, until the pain had dwindled to a powerful throbbing, a throbbing that jolted his heart into the same rhythm; then, gingerly, he stood and shuffled out into the hall. Leaning on the railing, he eased down the stairs to Michaela's room and lowered himself into a sitting position. He let out a shuddering sigh. Actinic flashes burst in front of his eyes.

"Michaela," he said. "Listen to me." His voice sounded feeble: the voice of an old, old man.

"I've got a knife," she said from just behind the door. "I'll use it if you try to break in."

"I wouldn't worry about that," he said. "And I sure as hell wouldn't worry about being raped. Now will you listen?"

No response.

He told her everything, and when he was done, she said, "You're insane. You raped me."

"I wouldn't hurt you. I...." He had been on the verge of telling her he loved her, but decided it probably wasn't true. He probably just wished that he had a good, clean truth like love. The pain was making him nauseated again, as if the blackish purple stain of his bruises were seeping up into his stomach and filling him with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bad gases. He struggled to his feet and leaned against the wall. There was no point in arguing, and there was not much hope that she would leave the house on her own, not if she reacted to Aimée like Ginny Whitcomb. The only solution was to go to the police, accuse her of some crime. Assault. She would accuse him of rape, but with luck they would both be held overnight. And he would have time to wire Mr. Chatterji ... who would believe him. Mr. Chatterji was by nature a believer: it simply hadn't fit his notion of sophistication to give credence to his native spirits. He'd be on the first flight from Delhi, eager to document the Terror.

Himself eager to get it over, Eliot negotiated the stairs and hobbled across the courtyard; but the Khaa was waiting, flapping its arms in the shadowed alcove that led to the street. Whether it was an effect of the light or of its battle with Aimée, or, specifically, of the pale scrap of fire visible within its hand, the Khaa looked less substantial. Its blackness was somewhat opaque, and the air around it was blurred, smeary, like waves over a lens: it was as if the Khaa were being submerged more deeply in its own medium. Eliot felt no compunction about allowing it to touch him; he was grateful to it, and his relaxed attitude seemed to intensify the communication. He began to see images in his mind's eye: Michaela's face, Aimée's, and then the two faces were superimposed. He was shown this over and over, and he understood from it that the Khaa wanted the possession to take place. But he didn't understand why. More images. Himself running, Michaela running, Durbar Square, the mask of White Bhairab, the Khaa. Lots of Khaa. Little black hieroglyphs. These images were repeated, too, and after each sequence the Khaa would hold its hand up to his face and display the glimmering scrap of Aimée's fire. Eliot thought he understood, but whenever he tried to convey that he wasn't sure, the Khaa merely repeated the images.

At last, realizing that the Khaa had reached the limits of its ability to communicate, Eliot headed for the street. The Khaa melted down, reared up in the doorway to block his path, and flapped its arms desperately. Once again Eliot had a sense of its weird-old-man-ness. It went against logic to put his trust in such an erratic creature, especially in such a dangerous plan; but logic had little hold on him, and this was a permanent solution. If it worked. If he hadn't misread it. He laughed. The hell with it!

"Take it easy, Bongo," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I get my shootin' iron fixed."

The waiting room of Sam Chipley's clinic was crowded with Newari mothers and children, who giggled as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eliot did a bowlegged shuffle through their midst. Sam's wife led him into the examination room, where Sam — a burly, bearded man, his long hair tied in a ponytail — helped him onto a surgical table.

"Holy shit!" he said after inspecting the injury. "What you been into, man?" He began rubbing ointment into the bruises.

"Accident," gritted Eliot, trying not to cry out.

"Yeah, I bet," said Sam. "Maybe a sexy little accident who had a change of heart when it come down to strokes. You know, not gettin' it steady might tend to make you a tad intense for some ladies, man. Ever think about that?"

"That's not how it was. Am I all right?"

"Yeah, but you ain't gonna be superstud for a while." Sam went to the sink and washed his hands. "Don't gimme that innocent bullshit. You were tryin' to slip it to Chatterji's new squeeze, right?"

"You know her?"

"He brought her over one day, showin' her off. She's a head case, man. You should know better."

"Will I be able to run?"

Sam laughed. "Not hardly."

"Listen, Sam." Eliot sat up, winced. Chatterji's lady. She's in bad trouble, and I'm the only one who can help her. I have to be able to run, and I need something to keep me awake. I haven't slept for a couple of days."

"I ain't givin' you pills, Eliot. You can stagger through your doper phase without my help." Sam finished drying his hands and went to sit on a stool beside the window; beyond the window was a brick wall, and atop it a string of prayer flags snapped in the breeze.

"I'm not after a supply, damn it! Just enough to keep me going tonight. This is important, Sam!"

Sam scratched his neck. "What kind of trouble she in?"

"I can't tell you now," said Eliot, knowing that Sam would laugh at the idea of something as metaphysically suspect as the Khaa. "But I will tomorrow. It's not illegal. Come on, man! There's got to be something you can give me."

"Oh, I can fix you up. I can make you feel like King Shit on Coronation Day." Sam mulled it over. "O.K., Eliot. But you get your ass back here tomorrow and tell me what's happenin'." He gave a snort of amusement. "All I can say is it must be some strange damn trouble for you to be the only one who can save her."

After wiring Mr. Chatterji, urging him to come home at once, Eliot returned to the house and unscrewed the hinges of the front door. He was not certain that Aimée would be able to control the house, to slam doors and make windows stick as she had with her house in New Hampshire, but he didn't want to take any

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chances. As he lifted the door and set it against the wall of the alcove, he was amazed by its lightness; he felt possessed of a giddy strength, capable of heaving the door up through the well of the courtyard and over the roofs. The cocktail of pain-killers and speed was working wonders. His groin ached, but the ache was distant, far removed from the center of his consciousness, which was a fount of well-being. When he had finished with the door, he grabbed some fruit juice from the kitchen and went back to the alcove to wait.

In midafternoon Michaela came downstairs. Eliot tried to talk to her, to convince her to leave, but she warned him to keep away and scuttled back to her room. Then, around five o'clock, the burning woman appeared, floating a few feet above the courtyard floor. The sun had withdrawn to the upper third of the well, and her fiery silhouette was inset into slate-blue shadow, the flames of her hair dancing about her head. Eliot, who had been hitting the pain-killers heavily, was dazzled by her: had she been a hallucination, she would have made his All-Time Top Ten. But even realizing that she was not, he was too drugged to relate to her as a threat. He snickered and shied a piece of broken pot at her. She shrank to an incandescent point, vanished, and that brought home to him his foolhardiness. He took more speed to counteract his euphoria, and did stretching exercises to loosen the kinks and to rid himself of the cramped sensation in his chest.

Twilight blended the shadows in the courtyard, celebrants passed in the street, and he could hear distant drums and cymbals. He felt cut off from the city, the festival. Afraid. Not even the presence of the Khaa, half-merged with the shadows along the wall, served to comfort him. Near dusk, Aimée Cousineau walked into the courtyard and stopped about twenty feet away, staring at him. He had no desire to laugh or throw things. At this distance he could see that her eyes had no whites or pupils or irises. They were dead black. One moment they seemed to be the bulging head of black screws threaded into her skull; the next they seemed to recede into blackness, into a cave beneath a mountain where something waited to teach the joys of hell to whoever wandered in. Eliot sidled closer to the door. But she turned, climbed the stairs to the second landing, and walked down Michaela's hallway.

Eliot's waiting began in earnest.

An hour passed. He paced between the door and the courtyard. His mouth was cottony; his joints felt brittle, held together by frail wires of speed and adrenaline. This was insane! All he had done was to put them in worse danger. Finally, he heard a door close upstairs. He backed into the street, bumping into two Newari

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

girls, who giggled and skipped away. Crowds of people were moving toward Durbar Square.

"Eliot!"

Michaela's voice. He'd expected a hoarse, demon voice, and when she walked into the alcove, her white scarf glowing palely against the dark air, he was surprised to see that she was unchanged. Her features held no trace of anything other than her usual listlessness.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she said, walking toward him. "I know you didn't do anything. I was just upset about last night."

Eliot continued to back away.

"What's wrong?" She stopped in the doorway.

It might have been his imagination, the drugs, but Eliot could have sworn that her eyes were much darker than normal. He trotted off a dozen yards or so and stood looking at her.

"Eliot!"

It was a scream of rage and frustration, and he could scarcely believe the speed with which she darted toward him. He ran full tilt at first, leaping sideways to avoid collisions, veering past alarmed, dark-skinned faces; but after a couple of blocks, he found a more efficient rhythm and began to anticipate obstacles, to glide in and out of the crowd. Angry shouts were raised behind him. He glanced back. Michaela was closing the distance, beelining for him, knocking people sprawling with what seemed effortless blows. He ran harder. The crowd grew thicker, and he kept near the walls of the houses, where it was thinnest; but even there it was hard to maintain a good pace. Torches were waved in his face; young men — singing, their arms linked — posed barriers that slowed him further. He could no longer see Michaela, but he could see the wake of her passage. Fists shaking, heads jerking. The entire scene was starting to lose cohesiveness to Eliot. There were screams of torchlight, bright shards of deranged shouts, jostling waves of incense and ordure. He felt like the only solid chunk in a glittering soup that was being poured through a stone trough.

At the edge of Durbar Square, he had a brief glimpse of a shadow standing by the massive gilt doors of Degutale Temple. It was larger and a more anthracitic black than Mr. Chatterji's Khaa: one of the old ones, the powerful ones. The sight buoyed his confidence and restored his equilibrium. He had not misread the plan. But he knew that this was the most dangerous part. He had lost track of Michaela, and the crowd was sweeping him along; if she caught up to him now, he would not be able to run. Fighting for elbow room, struggling to keep his feet, he was borne into the temple complex. The pagoda roofs sloped up into darkness like strangely carved mountains, their peaks hidden by a moonless night; the cobbled paths were narrow, bare-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ly ten feet across, and the crowd was being squeezed along them, a lava flow of humanity. Torches bobbed everywhere, sending wild licks of shadow and orange light up the walls, revealing scowling faces on the eaves. Atop its pedestal, the gilt statue of Hanuman — the monkey god — looked to be swaying. Clashing cymbals and arrhythmic drumming scattered Eliot's heartbeat; the sinewy wail of oboes seemed to be graphing the fluctuations of his nerves.

As he swept past Hanuman Dhoka Temple, he caught sight of the brass mask of White Bhairab shining over the heads of the crowd like the face of an evil clown. It was less than a hundred feet away, set in a huge niche in a temple wall and illuminated by light bulbs that hung down among strings of prayer flags. The crowd surged faster, knocking him this way and that; but he managed to spot two more Khaa in the doorway of Hanuman Dhoka. Both melted downward, vanishing, and Eliot's hopes soared. They must have located Michaela, they must be attacking! By the time he had been carried to within a few yards of the mask, he was sure that he was safe. They must have finished her exorcism by now. The only problem left was to find her. That, he realized, had been the weak link in the plan. He'd been an idiot not to have foreseen it. Who knows what might happen if she were to fall in the midst of the crowd. Suddenly he was beneath the pipe that stuck out of the god's mouth; the stream of rice beer arching from it looked translucent under the lights, and as it splashed his face (no fish), its coldness acted to wash away his veneer of chemical strength. He was dizzy, his groin throbbed. The great face, with its fierce fangs and goofy, startled eyes, appeared to be swelling and rocking back and forth. He took a deep breath. The thing to do would be to find a place next to a wall where he could wedge himself against the flow of the crowd, wait until it had thinned, and then search for her. He was about to do that very thing when two powerful hands gripped his elbows from behind.

Unable to turn, he craned his neck and peered over his shoulder. Michaela smiled at him: a gloating "gotcha!" smile. Her eyes were dead-black ovals. She shaped his name with her mouth, her voice inaudible above the music and shouting, and she began to push him ahead of her, using him as a battering ram to forge a path through the crowd. To anyone watching, it might have appeared that he was running interference for her, but his feet were dangling just off the ground. Angry Newar yelled at him as he knocked them aside. He yelled, too. No one noticed. Within seconds they had got clear into a side street, threading between groups of drunkards. People laughed at Eliot's cries for help, and one guy imitated the funny loose-limbed way he was running.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michaela turned into a doorway, carrying him down a dirt-floored corridor whose walls were carved into ornate screens; the dusky orange lamplight shining through the screens cast a lacework of shadow on the dirt. The corridor widened to a small courtyard, the age-darkened wood of its walls and doors inlaid with intricate mosaics of ivory. Michaela stopped and slammed him against a wall. He was stunned, but he recognized the place to be one of the old Buddhist temples that surrounded the square. Except for a life-sized statue of a golden cow, the courtyard was empty.

"Eliot." The way she said it, it was more of a curse than a name.

He opened his mouth to scream, but she drew him into an embrace; her grip on his right elbow tightened, and her other hand squeezed the back of his neck, pinching off the scream.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I only want to kiss you."

Her breasts crushed into his chest, her pelvis ground against him in a mockery of passion, and inch by inch she forced his face down to hers. Her lips parted, and — *oh, Christ Jesus!* — Eliot writhed in her grasp, enlivened by a new horror. The inside of her mouth was as black as her eyes. She wanted him to kiss that blackness, the same she had kissed beneath the Eiger. He kicked and clawed with his free hand, but she was irresistible, her hands like iron. His elbow cracked, and brilliant pain shot through his arm. Something else was cracking in his neck. Yet none of that compared to what he felt as her tongue — a burning black poker — pushed between his lips. His chest was bursting with the need to scream, and everything was going dark. Thinking this was death, he experienced a peevish resentment that death was not — as he'd been led to believe — an end to pain, that it merely added a tickling sensation to all his other pain. Then the searing heat in his mouth diminished, and he thought that death must just have been a bit slower than usual.

Several seconds passed before he realized that he was lying on the ground, several more before he noticed Michaela lying beside him, and — because darkness was tattering the edges of his vision — it was considerably longer before he distinguished the six undulating darknesses that had ringed Aimée Cousineau. They towered over her; their blackness gleamed like thick fur, and the air around them was awash with vibration. In her fluted white nightgown, her cameo face composed in an expression of calm, Aimée looked the antithesis of the vaguely male giants that were menacing her, delicate and finely worked in contrast to their crudity. Her eyes appeared to mirror their negative color. After a moment, a little wind kicked up, swirling about her. The undulations of the Khaa in-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

creased, becoming rhythmic, the movements of boneless dancers, and the wind subsided. Puzzled, she darted between two of them and took a defensive stance next to the golden cow; she lowered her head and stared up through her brows at the Khaa. They melted downward, rolled forward, sprang erect and hemmed her in against the statue. But the stare was doing its damage. Pieces of ivory and wood were splintering, flying off the walls toward the Khaa, and one of them was fading, a mist of black particles accumulating around its body; then, with a shrill noise that reminded Eliot of a jet passing overhead, it misted away.

Five Khaa remained in the courtyard Aimée smiled and turned her stare on another. Before the stare could take effect, however, the Khaa moved close, blocking Eliot's view of her; and when they pulled back, it was Aimée who showed signs of damage. Rills of blackness were leading from her eyes, webbing her cheeks, making it look as if her face were cracking. Her nightgown caught fire, her hair began to leap. Flames danced on her fingertips, spread to her arms, her breast, and she assumed the form of the burning woman.

As soon as the transformation was complete, she tried to shrink, to dwindle to her vanishing point; but, acting in unison, the Khaa extended their hands and touched her. There was that shriek of tortured metal, lapsing to a high-pitched hum, and to Eliot's amazement, the Khaa were sucked inside her. It was a rapid process. The Khaa faded to a haze, to nothing, and veins of black marbled the burning woman's fire; the blackness coalesced, forming into five tiny stick figures, a hieroglyphic design patterning her gown. With a fuming sound, she expanded again, regaining her normal dimensions, and the Khaa flowed back out, surrounding her. For an instant she stood motionless, dwarfed: a schoolgirl helpless amidst a circle of bullies. Then she clawed at the nearest of them. Though she had no features with which to express emotion, it seemed to Eliot there was desperation in gesture, in the agitated leaping of her fiery hair. Unperturbed, the Khaa stretched out their enormous mitten hands, hands that spread like oil and enveloped her.

The destruction of the burning woman, of Aimée Cousineau, lasted only a matter of seconds; but to Eliot it occurred within a bubble of slow time, a time during which he achieved a speculative distance. He wondered if — as the Khaa stole portions of her fire and secreted it within their bodies — they were removing disparate elements of her soul, if she consisted of psychologically distinct fragments: the girl who had wandered into the cave, the girl who had returned from it, the betrayed lover. Did she embody gradations of innocence and sinfulness, or was she a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

contaminated essence, an unfractionated evil? While still involved in this speculation, half a reaction to pain, half to the metallic shriek of her losing battle, he lost consciousness, and when he reopened his eyes, the courtyard was deserted. He could hear music and shouting from Durbar Square. The golden cow stared contentedly into nowhere.

He had the idea that if he moved, he would further break all the broken things inside him; but he inched his left hand across the dirt and rested it on Michaela's breast. It was rising and falling with a steady rhythm. That made him happy, and he kept his hand there, exulting in the hits of her life against his palm. Something shadowy above him. He strained to see it. One of the Khaa ... No! It was Mr. Chatterji's Khaa. Opaquely black, scrap of fire glimmering in its hand. Compared to its big brothers, it had the look of a skinny, sorry mutt. Eliot felt camaraderie toward it.

"Hey, Bongo," he said weakly. "We won."

A tickling at the top of his head, a whining note, and he had an impression not of gratitude — as he might have expected — but of intense curiosity. The tickling stopped, and Eliot suddenly felt clear in his mind. Strange. He was passing out once again, his consciousness whirling, darkening, and yet he was calm and unafraid. A roar came from the direction of the square. Somebody — the luckiest somebody in the Katmandu Valley — had caught the fish. But as Eliot's eyelids fluttered shut, as he had a last glimpse of the Khaa looming above them and felt the warm measure of Michaela's heartbeat, he thought maybe that the crowd was cheering the wrong man.

Three weeks after the night of White Bhairab, Ranjeesh Chatterji divested himself of all worldly possessions (including the gift of a year's free rent at his house to Eliot) and took up residence at Swayambhunath where — according to Sam Chipley, who visited Eliot in the hospital — he was attempting to visualize the Avalokitesvara Buddha. It was then that Eliot understood the nature of his newfound clarity. Just as it had done long ago with the woman's goiters, the Khaa had tried his habituation to meditation on for size, had not cared for it, and had sloughed it off in a handy respository: Ranjeesh Chatterji.

It was such a delicious irony that Eliot had to restrain himself from telling Michaela when she visited that same afternoon; she had no memory of the Khaa, and news of it tended to unsettle her. But otherwise she had been healing right along with Eliot. All her listlessness had eroded over the weeks, her capacity for love was returning and was focused solely on Eliot. "I guess I needed someone to show me that I was worth an effort,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she told him. "I'll never stop trying to repay you." She kissed him. "I can hardly wait till you come home." She brought him books and candy and flowers; she sat with him each day until the nurses shooed her away. Yet being the center of her devotion disturbed him. He was still uncertain whether or not he loved her. Clarity, it seemed, made a man dangerously versatile, his conscience flexible, and instituted a cautious approach to commitment. At least this was the substance of Eliot's clarity. He didn't want to rush into anything.

When at last he did come home, he and Michaela made love beneath the starlight glory of Mr. Chatterji's skylight. Because of Eliot's neck brace and cast, they had to manage the act with extreme care, but despite that, despite the ambivalence of his feelings, this time it *was* love they made. Afterward, lying with his good arm around her, he edged nearer to commitment. Whether or not he loved her, there was no way this part of things could be improved by any increment of emotion. Maybe he'd give it a try with her. If it didn't work out, well, he was not going to be responsible for her mental health. She would have to learn to live without him.

"Happy?" he asked, caressing her shoulder.

She nodded and cuddled closer and whispered something that was partially drowned out by the crinkling of the pillow. He was sure he had misheard her, but the mere thought that he hadn't was enough to lodge a nugget of chill between his shoulder blades.

"What did you say?" he asked.

She turned to him and propped herself on an elbow, silhouetted by the starlight, her features obscured. But when she spoke, he realized that Mr. Chatterji's Khaa had been true to its erratic traditions on the night of White Bhairab; and he knew that if she were to tip back her head ever so slightly and let the light shine into her eyes, he would be able to resolve all his speculations about the composition of Aimée Cousineau's soul.

"I'm wed to Happiness," she said.

SOLUTION TO SEPTEMBER ACROSTIC

AUTHOR: Philip Wylie **TITLE:** *The Disappearance*

TEXT: "Time passed like time in a sinister dream: who would run in such nightmares finds his feet glued; who longs to stay is propelled toward his dread. The dramatis personae are similarly turned about: the virtuous seem foul, and the meek ferocious."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

More than Mycroft
in Heinlein's
The Moon is a Harsh Mistress,
More than HAL in
Clarke and Kubrick's *2001,*

VALENTINA:
Soul In Sapphire

brings to life what
Artificial Intelligence
is all about.

If you could program yourself
a best friend, she would be...

Joseph H. Delaney and
Marc Stiegler

If being human means to experience love, fear, joy...then Valentina is human. She is so real, so evocative, that you know that somewhere, in some mainframe's core memory, she already exists.

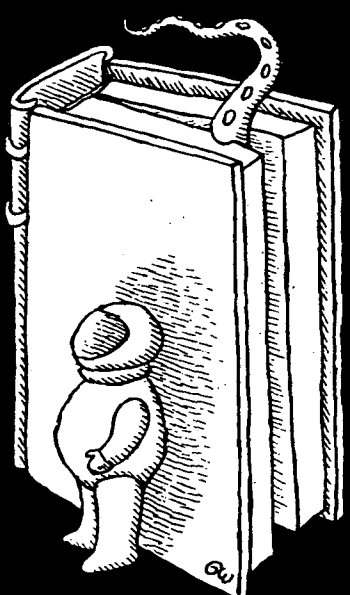
BAEN BOOKS
OCTOBER
55916-8
320 pp. • $3.50

Distributed by Simon & Schuster
Mass Merchandise Sales Company
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



The Pig Plantagenet, Allen Andrews, Tor, $2.95

World's End, Joan D. Vinge, Bluejay Books, $40.00, $13.95

Sword and Sorceress, Marion Zimmer Bradley, ed., DAW Books, $2.95

The Hobbit, J. R. R. Tolkien, Ballantine, $2.95

Tor Books, which will be displaying far more variety in its list than before, has come up with a fascinating winner in reprinting a 1980 Viking Press book. It ought to be *The Pig, Plantagenet,* since that is the subject porker's name. But never mind; we have come across another work in the delicate genre of animal fantasies, this one a tad more fairy-tale-like than most. It is a charmer.

Like most good fairy tales, it's set in Medieval times, with dark forests and perilous roads, ambitious noblemen, worthy farmers, and the like. There is something so satisfying to the soul, so potent, in this milieu, that one is led to speculate whether dark ages happen not through failures of civilization but through successes of some social impulse we should know more about. If so, it's a complicated impulse, for it may be that we court darkness in order to provide better opportunities for light. Certainly the outstanding quality of this conte is its triumphant joyousness.

Let me swiftly tell you the story: Plantagenet, the pet pig of the pros-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

perous farmer's utterly charming daughter, saves the forest creatures from wholesale slaughter by the savage Messires de Frebois, des Golletieres, et des Chaussees, who think only of their own glory and the upcoming celebration of Saint Andrew's Fair. Accordingly, a vastly staffed and impressively organized hunt shall be launched from Chateau Crespin on the morning of November Four at precisely seven ack-emma, and only the delicate, pink, pampered pig, Plantagenet, scurrying through the fearsome wood to take word to the massively patriarchal boar, Grondin, can hope to affect this outcome.

How can you not like it? Embellished by hundreds of hand-stitched details of naming, of observation of life and of felicity of prose, Andrew's work is a masterpiece of storytelling in the good old way of storytelling. It shines with a simplicity and artlessness which are in fact impossible for most writers to find, and it speaks encouragingly to something so deep inside us that it must be among the things we surely share with everything that thinks and feels.

I think I sometimes give the impression, here and elsewhere, that I believe it's all ultimately knowable about creativity; that we may look forward to a day when spontaneous invention can be produced to order and by rule. Oh, no, no, I don't believe that for a moment, any more than I believe there is any likelihood of ever finding flawless art. Rather, I think we are all preparing ourselves to appreciate flawless art should it ever occur.

Meanwhile, we are drawing courage — that is, the ability to run the race — from the times when the light of flawlessness slants through the world's opacities and testifies to the existence of some luminous source which mitigates the night. We are in some danger here of my becoming less than precise; what I mean to say is that every so often, among the many kinds of good book, we get one like this one — an apparently simple fable such as one might improvise for children — and it proves to have enormous power despite its lack of literary complication. It's fascinating to me that so often these apparent bursts of divine illumination seem to come to unheralded persons who have made no particular attempt to impress themselves upon the world of prose fiction.

Or at least that's my impression of Allen Andrews, about whom I know nothing. That very fact, of course, causes me to believe that this is one of those people who, broadly and deeply educated, have for some private reason undertaken a brief excursion into fiction-writing and are perhaps themselves bemused to look upon what they have wrought. I may be wrong, of course, in this particular case, but the history of literature is full of valid examples, and there's a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

great deal to be thought-about in the existence of the phenomenon.

And, by the way, before we shuffle on to the next work, a word of approbation is due *Plantagenet*'s interior illustrator, Michael Foreman, and to Tor's production department for doing its best to reprint his work despite the hostile format of the rack-size mass-market paperback. The cover, a lovely painting, is a new one by Victoria Poyser.

The next work is Joan Vinge's *World's End,* the sequel to her Hugo-winning 1980 *The Snow Queen,* and my copy — the $40 slipcased special edition — has the Dillon endpapers as well as the luminous Dillon cover painting and so is a beautiful book before it even begins to deploy its prose. I don't think you can have a new one; they made only a few hundred of them, and they're sold out, a Bluejay salesman told me toward the end of May. (He surely meant "shipped out," which could mean you'd find one to appraise at specializing book-dealers.) The $13.95 regular edition is quite a handsome book as well, and the prose is the same.

It is not in the usual sense a sequel, since this book is set away from Tiamat, world of Moon Dawntreader Summer, and concerns itself entirely with BZ Gundhalinu, unhappy soul. It is, as Vinge says, Book Two in the *Snow Queen* cycle, and we may in due course expect yet other books which are related but not necessarily directly sequential.

BZ Gundhalinu is a Kharemoughi — that is, a man born and bred to rule by service; a member of a class of conscience-driven aristocrats, most of whom, one suspects, do not take it all that seriously. Certainly, BZ's two wastrel brothers don't. But BZ makes up for them; seldom will you encounter a character more tormented by guilt, more ready to dwell on his shortcomings.

A young, tough, highly trained police officer of great intelligence and character, BZ can barely function at all, bound up as he is in self-recriminations for his failure as Moon's lover, as his father's son, as guardian of the law, as a functionary of the interstellar imperial Hegemony. Inside, he's a mumbling old man — or so he sees himself. In a noteworthy achievement of skill, Vinge lets us see that under this is an individual of great courage and perseverance who will endure if it's at all possible and will do the job if it's at all do-able. (All the while, of course, consciously second-guessing his methods and reviling himself.)

The story is that after Tiamet's solar system enters its Summer cycle and its stargate closes, BZ asks for assignment to a grim outlaying system where he can in effect be in exile. The inhabitable planet, Four, is considered useless except for industrial exploitation, and — allowing for some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

jungles, swamps and deserts — displays the demographic and cultural features of, say, Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1925. But at its center is a fabled hidden city ruled by a witch, and marvelous treasures that a rarely fortunate prospector might find and then be able to keep. It's in search of this lode that BZ's two brothers now appear, they having blown away the family honor and the family fortune bequeathed to them by their father. They, of course, not only become lost and enslaved but, when found, turn on BZ.

In the end, BZ rescues them, and makes a series of marvelous discoveries on every known psychic level; by the book's end, he is, as you might have expected, a much different person; perhaps not, however, in the ways you anticipated, inasmuch as Vinge is a considerable talent. But if you loved *The Snow Queen,* you are in some danger of frowning all the way through the new book, waiting for something of the old book to strike a waiting chord within you. Won't happen.

The Snow Queen was an epic of interstellar imperialism, on the Frank Herbert model, with broad external events sweeping over its details on geophysics and stellar dynamics, anthropology and biophysics, and with its marvelous substance that only this one world produces. *World's End* is a Freudian archedrama, almost totally internalized. I think it's quite consciously constructed on mulitiple levels of allusion, archetype and symbol. It comes complete not only with the obvious sibling rivalry but with a much more indirectly stated, and far more powerful, oedipal sub-theme that prompts all sorts of bemused speculation on what makes telepathy and other "one-ness" devices so attractive in the SF psychic pharmacopoeia.

Whatever, it's a rather good book — in some ways, a remarkable book — of the kind, which is not at all ostensibly *The Snow Queen*'s kind (though we might take another look back at that from this fresh perspective). The immediate point here is that Vinge, long notable as a professional, is a consummate professional still ascending toward the peak of her career, still exploring, still learning and deploying fresh conscious inventions, still growing. And rather than being an unknown, with no heralds but also with no track record, she does have a considerable body of previous work on display. Consequently, she is vulnerable to charges of undependability as a storyteller, there being a higher premium on the accustomed than there is on the artist's personal search for her limits and their possibilities. Either directly stated or in encoded form, such charges are in fact in the wind as a consequence of this latest work's publication, and I imagine they hurt and bewilder Vinge, as they have hurt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and bewildered other professionals before her. Amateurs have all the fun.

Amateurs are invulnerable. It's always an agreeable surprise when they produce anything at all, and they don't have to repeat if they don't want to. Being amateurs, of course, they also don't have the experience to realize how lucky they are, and prefer to dwell instead on the pangs and frustrations of trying to get just one story written and sold so that one might set one's feet on the golden road to the blisses enjoyed by the professionals. Ah, me!

But we all began that way, and some still are that way. It's a little-known fact of life that most writers have been ostensible professionals for several years before they realize they've still been amateurs, and have to scurry around to regroup themselves. Some of us crash and burn at that point, which is the point at which the average writer of good but not unique voice — i.e., the average good writer — begins trying to do something more than just synthesizing elements from all the stories one read as a child.

So there are several ways in which to look at an anthology like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceress*. One of them is as what it sells to be — a collection of fifteen new stories by fifteen brand-new or new-ish writers, selected by an indubitable expert on heroic fantasy, and contained within the editorial parameters of the title theme. The idea is to show the public some convincing heroic fantasies in which the moving force is a female hero. That idea is carried out strikingly well; this is an excellent bundle of good reads at a bargain price, and even I, who tired long ago of most young writers' idea of this fantasy milieu, found it so.

Another way to look at it is as a mass-market presentation by writers who would normally appear in small-press publications if ever — that is, by writers who for one reason or another are dedicated amateurs, usually in the best sense of the term. There are stories here by Glen Cook, by Phyllis Ann Karr, and other people who have had mass-market novels published, but it's more typical that Bradley's introductory notes don't even mention Pat Murphy's science fiction novel, and do mention that Bradley wasn't even aware of Cook's novels. Among the contributors here who have sold anywhere else at all, the credits tend to mention other specialized anthologies, usually of limited circulation, or a scattering of magazine sales. What we have here in this sense is a slice through the increasingly important phenomenon of off-the-main-track SF publishing (which is, of course, rapidly becoming very much part of the main track by virtue of its viability and vigor). Its sigil is writing by people to whom writing is, perforce, or occasionally

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by choice, very much a hobby rather than even a part-time occupation. One presumes they hope for a day when they can be Anne McCaffrey and live in a castle, or Stephen King and tunnel through one, and even if some of them don't, I think most readers expect them to.

This is an outgrowth of the expectation that everything that starts small wants to get big (and furthermore of subsidary confusions about what a "start" is and what "big" means, among which we get attempted definitions of what a "real" start is, and confusion of bigness with frequency, as well as of frequency with consistency). But there is really no rational basis for most of that. In real life, among real people possessed of urges to be writers — whatever that means — things happen because of those persons' inner nature, and then the surface person, as well as the cloud of observers, finds ways to make them fit preconceived verbalizations usually created by otherwise entirely uncreative people.

So I don't know if there's anything to be gained by audience, focussor or focussee in looking at the stories here with an eye to discovering members of the next set of SF luminaries, which is always the temptation. But that's also part of the excitement offered by this sort of volume and even more so by the small-press anthology which this book resembles in all but its packaging and distribution, so perhaps that's another good reason for buying this book.

Stories I particularly liked here — which means I found good stories in in them, and good storytelling as well — were Stephen L. Burns' "Taking Heart," Charles R. Saunders' "Gimmile's Songs," Pat Murphy's "With Four Lean Hounds" (though I would have liked it better as a much longer piece), and Michael Ward's "Daton and the Dead Things." Cook's story, "Severed Heads," was excellent until I realized it had been stretched out far too much for its abrupt and weakly anticlimatic ending, and Phyllis Ann Karr's story, obviously part of a novel, simply stops. But there is no outright disappointing story here. And although Bradley's editorial notes betray an occasional twistiness of rationale, together with a heavy didacticism, her purpose results in an attractive anthology idea and its accomplishment is impressive.

The most successful gifted amateur of our time in SF is, of course, J. R. R. Tolkien. He was 45 in 1937, when *The Hobbit* was published; a good age for fantasy writing, especially if one is going to use the avuncular voice.

The Hobbit and *The Pig Plantagenet* are profoundly different sorts of book, but one thing they share might make them seem similar. That is an air of slight detachment between the narrator and story, creat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing the sense of a kindly relative or close friend enthralling the children at bedtime with a told tale. Fairly often in traditional kidlit this feature is additionally glossed by overt tones of salutary instruction ... what James Blish mock-apothegmised with "Remember, in the days of Ancient Rome, dear children, there were no motorcars at all."

Puritan Ethic accounts for such impositions on the canon in general. What's interesting about Tolkien as distinguished from Andrews is that when he spun *The Hobbit* into being, he incorporated that mode wholeheartedly, retaining not only the sense of Uncle in the chair with the book in his lap but the didactic intrusions. While it is true that the subjects of the didacticism are invented and need exposition — the ethnography of *genus Hobbit,* for one — I think we have here a clear case of an amateur's creating a story feature because he hasn't even thought about any other way of performing that particular function; he simply did what was "natural."

Similarly, *The Hobbit* abounds with intrusions of song ... outbursts of onomatopoetic, not to say echolalic, doggerel poetry that works quite indifferently as written verse and often constitutes a seemingly pointless and redundant interruption in the flow of the prose narrative. Uncle is literally telling the tale aloud, responding to private melodies no one out of hearing can share.

Furthermore, Uncle dawdles shamelessly through passages any conscious professional would have paced far more expeditiously. Gandalf's wizardly recruitment of Bilbo Baggins as the dwarves' burglar hardly requires the sorts of self-indulgent detail Tolkien dwells on. It's enough we know that Bilbo loves living smugly in his Hobbit-hole and that he has equipped it with comestible treats to a fare-thee-well; no pro would have given these scenes the sort of overkill their author fondly lavishes upon them. Nor would a professional storyteller have taken so long to get the tale of the dwarves' quest into motion ... a characteristic which, infuriating as it is here to the sophisticated reader, pales by comparison to the molasses-in-January opening of Tolkien's next work in his cycle, as we shall see when I get around to reviewing that.

In fact, except for a few outstanding sequences — Bilbo's acquisition of Gollum's ring, and the lingering tinge of that poor dread creature's horripilating enmity — the intervention of the eagles — the intervention of the were-bear — the surreptitious entry into the lair of Smaug, the dragon, and the subsequent dialogue exchanged with him, as well as the scenes of his wrath — the passage through the Elven forest — the return home — there isn't much here that's done with particular or recognizable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

skill. Even in the memorable scenes (when one thinks about it, there are quite a few of them, aren't there, and the more one thinks, the more of them emerge back into the forefront of the mind) the writing seems hardly dramatic enough. Meanwhile, in general the story is far shorter than its manuscript, and ... well, I could go on for quite some time to list the technically flawed or at least technically dubious aspects of this work.

But perhaps that's not always what matters. Do we know what matters?

This Publication is available in Microform.

University Microfilms International

Please send additional information for _____

Name _____

Institution _____

Street _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

300 North Zeeb Road, Dept. P.R., Ann Arbor, Mi. 48106

Somewhere up there lurks an unknown...

The year is 3000 A.D. Aliens stalk the Earth, and Mankind cringes in hiding from their unknown, unlimited powers... Until one man decides to take them on...

Don't miss the national bestseller that everyone's talking about — BATTLEFIELD EARTH. It's the biggest science fiction novel ever written — over 1000 pages of gripping adventure by master storyteller, L. Ron Hubbard.

"A superlative storyteller with total mastery of plot and pacing ... epic in size and scope and as much fun as anything he ever wrote ... if you like Heinlein, you'll like Hubbard." —Publishers Weekly

"Will be talked about for a decade ... wonderful adventure ... great characters ... a masterpiece." A.E. Van Vogt

Read the New York Times bestseller BATTLEFIELD EARTH. Buy it today for only $4.95 —wherever paperbacks are sold.

Also ask for the dynamic music soundtrack of BATTLEFIELD EARTH at record stores everywhere.

The New York Times Bestseller

Battlefield Earth

by L. Ron Hubbard

Soon to be TWO motion pictures.

BRIDGE PUBLICATIONS, INC.

1414 NORTH CATALINA STREET • LA • CA 90027

1982, 1984 LRH. All rights reserved. 1984 BRIDGE PUBLICATIONS, INC.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ed Bryant's man of the future is a fellow so odd that he was expelled from the American Fortean Society for holding unorthodox views, in short a perfect man to single out to establish first contact with the aliens...

The Man of the Future

BY
EDWARD BRYANT

Gregory Corazza was not the only xenopsychologist in Denver; however, he was the only one to have received his Ph.D. via correspondence lessons. He was ahead of his time. It was a signal distinction little known or regarded by Corazza's few friends. To them—most of whom were fellow members of the Sanctioned Vicarious Violence Association—Corazza's great achievement was devising an entirely new blitzkrieg board game called Nuclear Pre-empt ("Win in the first thirty seconds—or forget it!"). Turned down by the major game manufacturers, Nuclear Pre-empt never replaced Dungeons and Dragons. His more conservative friends continued to love it.

Corazza was also a poet of sterling soul and mediocre talent. In addition, he was fascinated by the concept of synchronicity. He *knew* something bigger was going on, if he could just see the patterns.

The point of all this is simply to indicate that in the eyes of his culture, Corazza was considered a bit odd. He couldn't keep a steady job. He was the only member ever expelled from the American Fortean Society for holding unorthodox views.

Once upon a time, Corazza had aspired to be someone whom others considered unexceptional. The world apparently would not allow it. To some extent, he blamed his parents. When he was six, his parents had separated and disappeared on individual missions. Reputedly, his father was at present studying the deviated wapiti migrational patterns south of Prudhoe Bay; his mother was reported racing Wankel bikes down the Baja Peninsula. Now and then, whispered the family grapevine, they exchanged roles.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Corazza was reared through adolescence by his Aunt Thea in Starbuck, a small mountain community perched in the Front Range west of Denver. Aunt Thea considered herself an "herbal ablationist" by trade, not an altogether legal profession, but certainly a lucrative one so long as Coloradans kept snakes as pets She was a sensible and optimistic lady: "Gregory," she often said, "you're going to go places. High places. Strange places. But you're going to go. You're as smart as I've seen; and what's more, you're plugged into the universe in ways that are going to scare the crap out of you, but you won't regret it. Are you ready for that?"

"No," he would say. But when he was fifteen, Aunt Thea decided the time was right and politely kicked him out. Corazza hiked down the mountainside into Denver. He abandoned slab rock and the unceasing winds for the cobwebbed closeness of basement apartments.

He found temporary jobs where he could. An introverted boy, he forced an artificial extroversion on himself as a man. His ursine body was bulky and deceptively clumsy. Hirsute, slow in movement and speech, naturally he was the mark for every bar sharpie from Wazee Street to Colfax. Of course he made a pretty good living:

"Man, you tellin' me you can tell which drop gonna get to the bottom first?"

"Yes. I can do that. Every time."

"Well, you crazy. Here's ten says you can't."

And since Corazza was the only man in the men's room who had spent a basement winter studying polytropic polymers, liquid tensions, relative viscosities, peculiar characteristics of albumin and sugar content, and the highest technology of vitreous china . . .

"Go, baby! Go! Go! Go . . . . Dammit!"

"Thanks for the ten. Want to try another one?"

"Can't til I chug another brew."

It was a living.

Corazza's great disappointment one winter was that he had not been born Irish or even Welsh. He toiled at his epic sonnet sequence about quasi-stellar radio sources and wished he could write like Yeats, or even Rod McKuen. After brooding for a while, he felt more Russian than Celtic. Corazza wanted justification for a melancholy soul. He spent three months studying Slavic languages, but all he learned to say was, "Why is my film always scratched?" and "Is there in this place a dealer in photo requisites?" Since he did not own a camera, he went back to being an Irish poet.

As he entered his thirtieth year, he wondered whether the stereotype of passage would affect his psyche. It didn't. He also wondered, remembering Aunt Thea, whether, after all these years, something splendid would happen to him. It did.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

• • •

They were later called "shmoids" by their nostalgic human perceivers. The aliens were elongated bowling pin creatures whose method of precarious locomotion was rolling along their axis of greatest circumference. Uniform in size, at least to Earthly observers, the average shmoid possessed the mass of an AMF league pin. The creatures seemed divided into three color groups: red, yellow, and blue.

Shmoids were termed shmoids because they closely resembled the shmoo, the graphic invention of a popular cartoonist of decades past. (Shortly after the shmoid ships had appeared in major cities around the globe, the appearance of their pear-shaped crews had been hailed by science fiction writers as yet another valid prediction of their peculiar literary mode. "Coincidence," scoffed the authorities. "The *China Syndrome* syndrome," answered the writers. "Sheer coincidence," repeated those who knew better.)

Regardless, the shmoids' spherical ships appeared simultaneously over one hundred urban cores. The city centers being largely deserted, there was a perceptible lag time between arrival on Earth and official contact between natives and visiting species. The shmoids used this respite to initiate clandestine inquiries into the personnel files of multinational computer banks.

They knew whom they wanted. It wasn't coincidence.

As they were somewhat uncomfortable in a 21 percent oxygen atmosphere, the shmoids wore light and formfitting protective suits. Though transparent, the suits were fabricated from metal alloy. While rolling along any hard surface, the shmoids generated a noise similar to that of a bowling ball proceeding down its lane; with one difference—the vibrating, rolling rumble was never capped by the crash of scattering pins. For many human perceivers, the sensation was very much akin to listening to a single shoe drop—except in Marin County, where observers welcomed the aliens with Zen perception.

At first, Corazza thought he was hearing low thunder rolling from the western storm front. Then he idly wondered whether one of the upstairs tenants might be moving a refrigerator on a dolly. It did not occur to him to compare the sound with the background noise of a bowling alley. He rarely spent time in bowling alleys; and then, usually only in the rest room.

He heard a series of thumps from the direction of the stairwell. Perhaps tenants were moving surplus furnishings into one of the storage rooms. Corazza's low-ceilinged apartment shared the basement with a pair of raw-concrete storage areas and a brontosaurian furnace. The thumping

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stopped. The rumble cycled up again and ceased outside his door. Puzzled, Corazza set down the copy of Loewenthal's *Snoutlings*. He heard a tap-*tap*, tap-*tap* at the door.

When he opened the door, he saw no one.

"Down *here*, Earth person," said a metallic monotone. Corazza looked down and saw two bowling pins on their sides in front of his toes. One pin was red; the other, blue. "We are sentient extraterrestrial beings," said the red pin. "May we come in and talk with you?"

"Well, ah—" Corazza stared down at them for a moment. Aunt Thea had taught him manners. "Yes, of course, come in." He stepped back from the door, and the objects rolled into his kitchen.

"Do not think of us as bowling pins," said the blue one.

Corazza did not take his stare away from them. "No. No, of course not."

"You may refer to us as shmoids," said the red alien.

"Shmoids?"

"Your term. A superficial resemblance only, I assure you. Would I attempt to dissemble? Of course you don't know. We possess a synchronistic correspondence with a mythological Earth creature."

Corazza shook his head slowly. "Am I your first contact?"

The red alien bobbed its narrow end. "That is our equivalent of an affirmative nod." The voice issued from a grill in the base of the alien's broader end. "You may address me as Lucy. My companion is Ricky. We learned your language from electronic broadcasts. Does this make you feel at ease?"

"You really are extraterrestrials?" said Corazza, ignoring Lucy's questions. "This isn't someone's elaborate joke?" Lucy waggled enthusiastically. Wonder infused Corazza's voice. "Where are you from? Why are you here? For how long? Why did you contact me first?"

"We will satisfy your curiosity," said Ricky in a voice that sounded identical to Lucy's. "Please allow us time between your questions for answers." Corazza hunkered down and looked at the aliens expectantly. "First, our journey has involved many segments, the last of which was a thousand-light-year jump to your world. Our home lies in the system of a G-type star in what you call the constellation Cygnus."

Corazza said, "So how did you get—" He interrupted himself. "O.K., I'll shut up and listen."

"Thank you, Earth person," said Ricky. "I will answer all your queries."

"It's a test, isn't it?" Corazza bounced on the balls of his feet. "You're testing us for eligibility to join a galactic federation—"

"As it happens—" Ricky started to say.

"Actually," Lucy said, "we are here because your world is the only abode

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of sentient life in this star system. We came because we wish to ask the intelligent species of Earth to participate in our spawn-parent's fusion celebration. We shall stay only as long as the mission requires."

"Fusion celebration? Is that like a birthday?"

"It would be difficult to explain in Earth terms of sufficient nuance, but your birthday analogy is not utterly inaccurate. Suffice it that we are paying homage to the paramount value of our society."

"And you're inviting us on Earth to celebrate, too?"

Lucy said, "To participate, yes. We have already asked the other intelligent species on Earth. The dolphins said—"

"The *dolphins?*"

"—that they would agree to whatever you humans decided. It was all right by them, they indicated. They determined a group decision that translates idiomatically, I believe, to 'anything for a lark.' Actually, what they said was not 'lark' but the name of a small fish, which transliterates as—"

"I understand," said Corazza. "You know that I've had training as a xenopsychologist?" Lucy and Ricky bobbed. "It was mostly theoretical, but . . ." He trailed off. "For my final project, I did a linguistic breakdown to whistlepigs. Is that why you made first contact with me? I mean, because of my degree?"

"Partially," said Ricky. "That and your sheer good fortune." Corazza looked puzzled. "We determined to contact a native who was both intelligent and not completely absorbed into the mainstream of its society. Primarily, we wished to speak with an individual who tapped into the synchronistic patterns of the universe. Finally, we wanted a representative who stopped short of local standards of psychopathy."

"Thanks," said Corazza. "What's this about the synchronistic patterns?"

"We wanted a spokesnative who naturally would be in the midst of things without being imposed there."

"But I've never done much—" Corazza started to protest.

"Ah," said Ricky, "but you *will.*"

"Plus," said Lucy, "you possess a desirable level of objectivity. This is essential, since we hope you will make a decision of enormous consequence."

Corazza felt that events were accelerating beyond his comprehension. "What kind of decision?"

"Only this," said Lucy. "You must decide whether we shall alter the fusion process of your sun and cause critical instability leading to an instant supernova."

Corazza gaped. "But that would mean—"

Lucy and Ricky bobbed. Ricky said, "Precisely. We refer to nothing less than destroying the Earth."

"And us. . . ." Corazza swallowed with difficulty. His mouth and throat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were dry. "And the dolphins. All of us, murdered."

"There is a subtle distinction. We are nothing if not a merciful sort. Prior to the supernova, we would painlessly make extinct your species through the diligent application of neutrino bombs."

"But," said Corazza, *"why?"* A dim alarm rang somewhere distantly in the back of his mind. He couldn't identify it.

"Mercy," said Lucy, "is a conceptual value shared by both our peoples."

"No, I mean that first thing—destroying the sun and the Earth. *Why?*"

Ricky's voice at last took on what Corazza interpreted as a happier tone. "It is—or will be—all part of the fusion celebration. We have carefully calculated the time it will take for the light of this supernova to blaze in the skies of our home world. How fortunate that your star is situated the right distance."

"Just a bloody candle on a cosmic cake," said Corazza, mildly outraged.

"You *are* a poet," said Ricky.

"Of course," added Lucy, "you have the option of deciding against this project."

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you so often answer our questions with yet other questions?" said Ricky.

"It buys time to think," said Corazza honestly. "You mean you're asking me to decide whether Earth lives or dies?"

"That sums it up nicely," said Lucy.

Ricky put in, "The dolphins said they would abide by whatever you decided."

Corazza got up, painfully stretched his locked knees, and then collapsed in his one overstuffed chair. He breathed deeply a few times. "Why me?"

"Why not you?" said Lucy. "It's individuals who finally have to make all significant decisions."

"Someone has to," Ricky said. "Feel fortunate that from all the billions of other human beings, you have been singled out to decide something important."

"I don't think I want this responsibility," said Corazza.

"But now you have it," said Ricky sensibly.

Corazza looked unsure. "Do I have to decide now? I mean, right this instant?"

"We are reasonable creatures," said Lucy. "You have twenty-four hours. Sooner, if you like. We'll keep track."

"And now," said Ricky, "our business done, would you mind kicking us out?"

"Pardon?"

"Is that not the correct expression?"

Corazza lurched to his feet, crossed the room, and opened the door. The aliens remained immobile. "I thought you were leaving."

"We are, if you will be so kind as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to kick us out." Lucy's voice sounded expectant.

"You mean—?" He raised his booted foot tentatively.

"Yes," said Ricky.

Corazza walked over to the aliens and gingerly nudged Ricky with his toe. "Harder, please." The man gave the alien a halfhearted tap. Ricky rolled a few revolutions closer to the door. "Harder!" Corazza gave it a healthy kick. Ricky sailed through the air and slammed against the opposite side of the hall. "Excellent, Earth person."

"Please apply your boot to me equally," said Lucy. Corazza kicked the alien through the doorway.

"Good-bye," said the pair together. Ricky said, "We shall see you within the coming day." Tiny jets thrust from the major bulge of each body. On hissing columns of steam, the two aliens rose up the stairwell. Something scuttled back around the landing.

Corazza shut and locked the door to his apartment. He glanced at the telephone. Who would believe him?

The phone rang.

"See?" said Aunt Thea without preamble. "You *are* someone. You are a mensch."

"Why are you calling me at this precise moment?" said Corazza.

"Occult powers?" said Aunt Thea. "No. Coincidence."

Corazza groggily sat up in bed. His dream had translated the sounds of someone banging on his apartment door as the shmoids kicking the door down. Then he remembered that the aliens had no feet. "Yeah, all right, I'm coming." He swung his legs off the bed and fumbled for the boxer shorts draped over his reading lamp. At the door, he snapped on the kitchen light.

"Mr. Corazza?" The voice sounded good-humored, controlled.

He opened the door and found an elderly man dressed in a conservative gray suit. "Hello," Corazza said. "What time is it?" Aha, he thought. CIA? FBI?

"A bit past four," said the man. "May I come in?"

"Who are you?" Corazza stepped back from the door.

"Martinson," said the man. "Robert. Bob. I'm with the Smithsonian Institute's Institute for Short-lived Phenomena." He handed over a card.

"Yeah, I've heard of your outfit. I buy your yearbooks. Come on in. Coffee?"

Martinson shook his head and sank into the maw of the overstuffed chair. "This isn't, sad to say, a social occasion. Besides, caffeine keeps me awake." He seemed to reflect on that and added, "Not that I expect either one of us will be getting to sleep soon."

Corazza sat down in the director's chair he'd scavenged at the Salvation Army store. "I guess you're here about the, uh, shmoids."

Martinson nodded.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How come there's just you? Where are the spooks in trench coats? The diplomats? The marines and the tanks?"

"This is a sensitive matter. The government has opted to treat it delicately."

"Delicately?" said Corazza. "Or scared spitless?"

"Certainly the government does have some apprehensions. We postulate an interstellar capability for these creatures. Naturally there's a bit of fear that their advanced stage of technology could pose a threat to this nation, not to mention the rest of the planet."

"You don't know the half of it," said Corazza.

"Meaning what?"

"I'll tell you. Just hold on. But first I want to ask some things."

"Fair is fair." Martinson touched his thin gray moustache with an exquisitely manicured index finger. "I think you'll find the institute more candid than most other federal agencies."

"O.K., then. Why the institute?"

"My colleagues in the Department of Defense, NASA, and elsewhere feel that the Institute for Short-lived Phenomena has more experience with the new and what they term 'odd' than does any other government branch." Martinson allowed himself a quick smile. "I daresay they're right. Additionally, it helps that the president himself chose us. I believe he hopes that the shmoids are yet another *ephemeral* phenomenon."

"O.K.," said Corazza. "How did you find out that the shmoids were contacting me?"

"We — the government, that is — have computers that watch computers. The alarms went wild with unauthorized taps. At first, we thought it was time theft on an unprecedented scale; you know, kids in California, that sort of thing. Then the emergency evaluation teams started finding patterns: MMPI scores; grade files from the Sussex College of Science; membership registration in War Games, Inc. Everything converged in one name: yours. This apartment was put under surveillance twenty minutes before the shmoids arrived. I was flown in from Washington."

"Did the computers tell you why I'm the contact?"

"We have speculated." Martinson looked uncomfortable, and paused.

"So? It can't be that bad."

The government man seemed to pick his words carefully. "As nearly as we can determine from the parameters of the shmoids' computer queries, they consider you the human most likely, in some special way, to understand their own alien psychology. We suspect they're testing you. Or us."

"I guess that's a compliment." Martinson did not respond.

"Another thing."

"What?"

Martinson said, "You appear to be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the right man in the right place at the right time. Patterns are focusing on you."

"So now what?"

"That depends. It's your turn."

"O.K. Fair's fair, but you won't like it." Then Corazza told him about Lucy and Ricky, about the fusion celebration, about the prospective supernova and the neutrino bombing of humankind, not to mention dolphinkind. About the decision. He noticed the ISLP man looking at him peculiarly and stopped the recounting. "What is it?"

Martinson said, "I detect an odd tone in your voice now that you're speaking of the decision to eliminate all life on Earth."

"Odd?"

"In a word, enthusiastic. There is what I would term a tone of prurient interest to your voice. It concerns me."

Corazza cocked his head and replayed mentally what he had been saying, how he had said it. "The idea is sort of appealing."

"Mr. Corazza, can you seriously consider the shmoid proposal?" Martinson sounded scandalized.

"Why not? Ricky told me it was one of the few opportunities I'd ever have to make a significant decision. I see its point."

"To make the decision, yes," said Martinson. "But surely you would never contemplate acceding to the proposal."

Corazza smiled dreamily, enchanted with the thought. "I don't know, I really don't. There's something dark and seductive about taking personal responsibility for blowing up a whole planetary system."

"You're mad!" Martinson struggled to his feet.

"You sound like a bad horror movie."

"So do you," said Martinson firmly.

"No, I'm just ... curious."

Martinson stared at him and said slowly, "Somebody had to be alien enough to empathize with the aliens; *that's* what the parameters meant. I should have listened to the shrinks."

"Don't get me wrong," said Corazza, vastly amused and grinning now. "I'll certainly give balanced arguments due consideration."

Martinson put his hand inside his coat. "I'm afraid it's time your government took a firmer stance in this matter." He stopped, frozen in midmotion.

After a moment, Corazza said, "Martinson?" There was no response. He touched the man's cheek; the skin was neither warm nor cold.

"It is a stasis field," said a reedy voice on the other side of the door. "Please let us in, Earth person."

Corazza crossed into the kitchen and opened the door. He looked down and said, "Ricky and Lucy?"

"Yes," said the blue shmoid. The aliens rolled over the threshold. "We apologize for immobilizing your fel-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

low Earth person. We feared he was about to attempt to coerce you unfairly."

"Is he O.K.?"

"He is merely slower and quieter than he was."

Ricky said, "We have come to ask you back to our ship. You will be safe during the remainder of your decision-making time."

Corazza looked at the aliens thoughtfully. "Is it the right time for this?"

The shmoids said together, "If you decide so."

"And if I don't want to go?"

"Oh, you certainly do not *have* to," Lucy hastily said.

"I'll go."

Corazza checked Martinson's coat pocket on the way out. The ISLP man appeared to have been reaching for a briar pipe in the zippered suede case.

Once established in synchronous orbit, the shmoid ship hung effectively stationary above Denver — at least that was what Ricky told Corazza. Not that the human could tell. Beyond the optical viewport, the Earth looked like a melon, an overripe blue fruit covered with creeping white cloud-mold. Corazza spent most of the docking time gently massaging his belly; the shmoid inertialess drive didn't seem to be everything it was cracked up to be. Blowing up a star system — and one's home, he thought —shouldn't hinge on dyspepsia.

"Is it not beautiful?" said Lucy. Corazza nodded. "Most sentient creatures feel that about their home worlds. We don't. Our home is singularly ugly."

Ricky said, "You would doubtless compare it to the coloration of your Earthly dung."

"Yet our world would still compare unfavorably even to that," said Lucy.

Corazza turned away from the sight of Earth. Though the decks through which he had traveled to the observation dome had teemed with busy shmoids, only Lucy and Ricky had accompanied him here. Only the pair had spoken with him. Here in this spherical observation chamber, domed to space, the man and two aliens were alone. The two shmoids had expressed a desire not to enter the dome. Corazza had insisted, and Ricky and Lucy agreed.

"We find the concept of open space oppressive," Ricky had said.

"Thus, conquering space was an onerous chore," Lucy added. "But we had to do it to fulfill our cultural quest."

"Into the dome," said Corazza firmly. "Keep me company." He didn't say, "please." He had a hunch.

"Ah, that's better," said Ricky, rolling along behind.

When the shuttle had docked with the mother ship, Corazza had noticed that the skin was stippled with view-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ports larded as thickly as the textured colors on a Seurat Easter egg.

In the observation dome, Corazza gawked out at the Earth superimposed on the field of stars. Something occurred to him. "I'm curious about the color differences among you. Will I get to meet one of the yellow shmoids?" The yellow aliens had clearly made up a numerical minority.

"The leader-surrogates?" said Lucy.

"Aren't there actual leaders?"

"It's a matter of humility—" Lucy started to say.

"And low self-esteem," said a voice from behind them. Corazza turned and saw a yellow shmoid pausing at the entry.

"You may as well come in," said the man.

"As you say," said the yellow shmoid, rolling in.

"So you're a leader?"

"Only a modest substitute."

"Who runs the show?" said Corazza.

"For now, we all — at least the yellow among us — share that terrible chore. We're hoping that perhaps you might help us out."

Corazza glanced back at the Earth. "How?"

"Did we mention that should you decide to accept your proposal about your world, you will be welcome to continue the voyage as our guest?"

He considered that. "You mean I wouldn't be required to join everyone else on the pyre?"

"Of course not," said the leader-surrogate.

"In fact," said Lucy, "we would be honored to offer you an integral position in the crew."

"As captain," said Ricky, so quickly that his words finished the first alien's sentence.

"Isn't this a little precipitous?" said Corazza.

The leader-surrogate said, "Not at all. We have weighed this offer carefully."

"But why me?"

"Do we really have to answer that question?" asked the leader-surrogate.

"I guess not." Corazza rubbed his aching belly.

"Then it's decided?"

Corazza surveyed the three aliens. He was traveling now on both logic and instinct; skating, he thought, on a very thin surface. "If I go along with you, I'll lead?"

"Yes," said Ricky.

"And get to discipline you?"

"Indeed, yes," said Lucy.

"And abuse you?"

"Oh, yes, yes," said the leader-surrogate.

Corazza looked down at his scuffed boots. "Some kind of fun now," he said.

"And so I had them bring me back down to Earth," said Corazza, finishing the account. "I ordered them to, kicked them when they lagged. They wanted it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Martinson, the ISLP man, shook his head, apparently still groggy from the stasis field. "Couldn't they have been a bit more straightforward?"

Corazza was preparing hot Ovaltine. He shrugged and said, "Speaking now as a newly blooded xenopsychologist, I think I did remarkably well just figuring out *what* they were doing. I'll keep working on the *why*."

Martinson took the Ovaltine and sipped gingerly. "It seems as though they could simply have told us that their single overriding cultural imperative was to be oppressed."

"Apparently the color taboos enter into it. The yellows, the leader-surrogates, are almost all bred out of the shmoid gene pool. They needed new governors, so they came here."

"But the circuitousness of their approach...." Martinson shook his head.

"They *did* give me all the clues," said Corazza. "It certainly was a test, after all. Remember the neutrino bombs that would annihilate all humans and dolphins? Neutrinos don't interact with solid matter. And the supernova ... there isn't enough material in our sun to fuel one. It was all a sham."

Martinson looked skeptical. "How can you really be sure? They're aliens."

Corazza shrugged again. "I can't."

"What are you going to do now?"

Corazza smiled back at the ISLP man. "I'm not sure. What are you going to do?"

"Report to my superiors. Let them know the world has just been saved. Figure out how to tell them the human race now has a new subservient species to kick around, and that we're all to become benevolent sadists. There should be at least one shmoid for every inhabitant of an industrialized nation."

Corazza shrugged. "It's what they want."

Martinson looked at him intently. "I ask again, Gregory. What are you going to do?"

"Honest, I don't know. I'll wait, I guess. My Aunt Thea has faith in me. I don't think the best thing's happened to me that's going to happen."

The ISLP man put down his empty mug. "Satisfy my curiosity. If the shmoid proposal to turn the sun supernova had been legitimate, would you really have considered validating it?"

Corazza smiled and flicked his butane lighter. The flame hissed up. "Just kidding around," he said.

Fortunate man, living in interesting times, Gregory Corazza sailed along the information lines of the universe. Patterns piled on quasars piled on "coincidences" overlaid on black holes wound around happenstance, permeating stars like grains of beach sand in old tennis shoes. Art and the real merged. Insights emerged. Just one example: the capybara is not only the largest rodent on Earth, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the entire galaxy as well.

The shrill rodent screaming translated to the telephone bell as Corazza swam up and out of cosmic dream depths.

"Yeah?"

"Greg? Is that you?" The voice seemed vaguely familiar.

"Unh. Who is this?"

"It's Bob Martinson, Greg. Sorry to wake you — happens all the time, doesn't it?"

"Mmph."

"Well, my apologies. I wouldn't have called if it weren't urgent. I expect you're still feeling miffed because the government didn't use you in the shmoid pacification program."

That was true. "Unph." He finally cleared his throat.

"We were grateful for your suggestions," said Martinson. "The shmoids are especially happy in the bowling alleys — it's an orgasmic experience for them."

"I could have done more."

Martinson's voice was apologetic but hurried. "May I be candid? The administrators thought you were a bit erratic."

Corazza got out one indignant, "But—"

"My apologies again for interrupting, but I have to change the subject." Martinson's voice switched timbre, sounded more solemn. "I have something for you," said the ISLP man. "William James wrote that human beings really live only when they live at the top of their energies."

"So?" Corazza said sullenly.

"I'll level with you. The world desperately needs a xenopsychologist with your qualifications again."

"The world?"

He detected urgency in Martinson's voice. "This time the event is not peculiarly American. We want you to catch a courier jet at Buckley — someone will pick you up in approximately seven minutes. You'll hop a military transport in Washington. You're going to England."

Corazza felt more alert. "Why?"

"To help the United Nations."

"For God's sake, Martinson, what about details? The events?"

"Sorry," said the man in Washington. "Here's the scoop. Mechanical war machines on articulated, stiltlike legs are devastating London with heat rays."

"Huh."

"Don't give me flatness of affect, Greg. Britain hasn't faced such jeopardy since the years of the Zeppelin raids and the Hitler menace."

"Let me guess," said Corazza. "The machines are manned — or monstered — by leathery octopal horrors."

"That's only the half of it," said Martinson. "Interpol computers indicate there have been massive thefts of stored flu vaccine all over the globe."

Corazza scratched himself satisfactorily and let his legs tauten in a

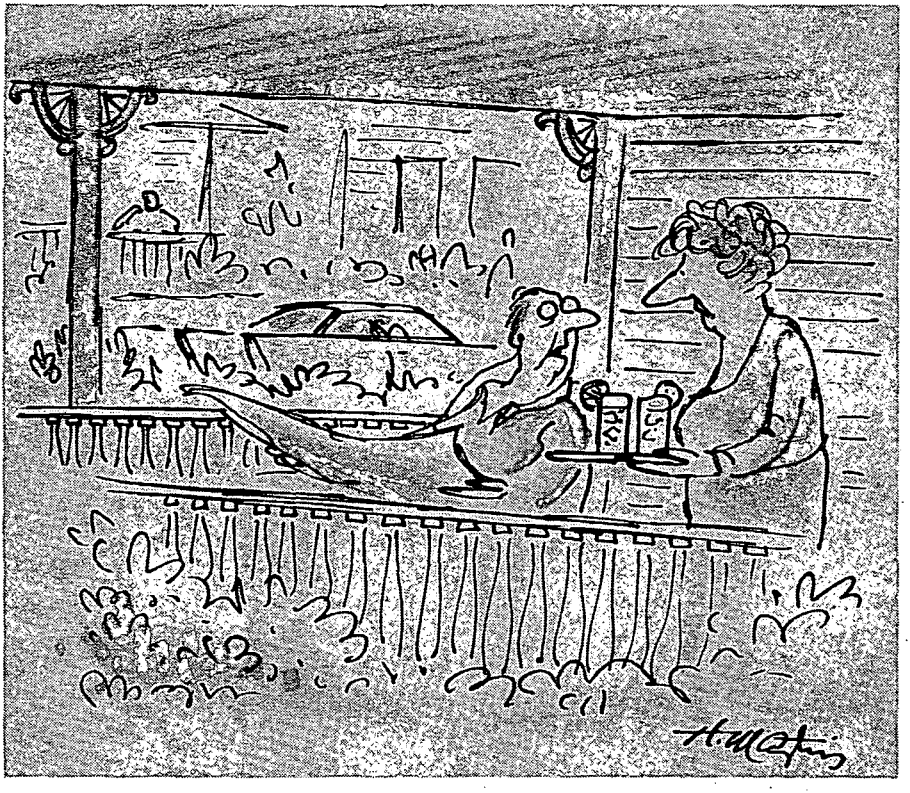
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stretch. The patterns looked clearer. "Well," he said. "Well, I think probably I can help you." The universe flowed through him. Line converged. He saw light beginning to shine through the east window well.

"Thank you," said Martinson. "The world thanks you."

Corazza slowly put the phone down. He felt happy. He knew it was time for Aunt Thea to call. It was good to be living in exciting times.

Again Corazza smiled. He was part of the future.



"While you were inside I thought I heard an organ grinder playing 'Nellie Bly', a newsboy shouting 'EXTRA!', a vendor calling 'Raspberries! Red Raspberries!', and an iceman chisling ice. But it was just the wind."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

British writer Ian Watson ("The Worm's Head," February 1984), is well known for his love of exotic settings. In "The Flesh of Her Hair" he takes us on a bizarre ocean voyage fraught with tension and conflict. So much for the soothing effect of the sea...

The Flesh of Her Hair

BY
IAN WATSON

Then a spirit passed before my face;
the hair of my flesh stood up.
— *Job* 4:15

I had decided to travel back to Europe from Japan as a passenger on a cargo ship. This would be much cheaper than flying — anyway, I loathed flying — and would give me a chance, I imagined, to finish the first draft of my book on the Japanese puppet theater.

I did toy, for a while, with the notion of sailing from Yokohama over to Nakhodka and catching the Trans-Siberian Railroad to cross the alternative "ocean of soil"; but though this journey would be even cheaper and considerably quicker than the sea journey, I feared that it would be uncomfortable and oppressive. Moreover, I was full of "Japanese sentiment" — a mood the retention of which seemed essential to the success of my projected book. To be confronted suddenly by Siberia on a train crowded (I imagined) with samovars and babushkas, military uniforms, and a motley of international travelers squeezed together like sardines, would have seemed quite inappropriate. I fancied that I could very well concentrate and crystallize into appropriate words my Japanese mood amidst the emptiness of the Pacific Ocean. I could meditate before my trusty portable Swiss typewriter, I could type a page or two, then take a turn about the deck. I would be completely detached from the world at large, able to return in spirit to the time of Chikamatsu. There would be few other passengers to bother me: ten at most. Nor would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they speak my language. For I would choose a foreign ship — neither Italian nor Japanese. (I thought of myself as partly Japanese, at least in soul.)

The next six weeks would be a period of gentle weaning from the Japan I loved — and, to mix a metaphor, of peaceful gestation of my book.

They would also prove, from the very first day, to be a terrible mistake.

I booked passage on the *Lübeck,* a container vessel outward bound from Yokohama twenty thousand kilometers nonstop by way of the Panama Canal. (When one is on the other side of the world, Italy and Germany do not seem very far apart, merely a rail journey. Besides, I had friends at Lugano in Switzerland, whom I dearly wished to visit before heading south to the stately decay of our family home outside Palermo.)

Arriving from Kyoto aboard the bullet train, I allowed myself the luxury of a taxi from Tokyo station all the way to Yokohama docks, since I had a fair amount of luggage with me. The taxi was the usual lurid affair, striped in red and orange, with French *chansons* warbling from a stereo cassette player. But there was a fine miniature flower arrangement in a glazed pot clipped to the back of the driver's seat, and I congratulated myself that this was the real Japan bidding farewell to me. The driver may have looked like a gangster, and driven his Toyota like one, but each morning when he rose from his quilt mattress to go on duty, he arranged flowers of the season tastefully for his vehicle.

We arrived at the docks by mid-afternoon. I checked my luggage through customs, and my driver whisked me along to the ship, where he helped me haul my bags and traps up the gangplank on board the *Lübeck.* The "cabin boy" — if that is the right term for a very tall blond Nordic specimen — shooed my driver back ashore and took over, showing me to my cabin, and informing me casually in impeccable English that dinner was at 1930. We would sail with the tide at 3 A.M. Then he melted away.

I surveyed the little cabin with satisfaction. It was very neat and orderly, in light pastel colors. There was a single bunkbed, a little table for my typewriter, a chair, and a picture on one wall, of — of course — a merchant ship at sea. A porthole of satisfactory size looked out from the cabin itself, and its twin from the tiled shower cubicle and the toilet adjacent. The whole was not unlike a *gastbof* I had once spent a few nights in at Innsbruck — if one transposed the foaming breakers I visualized outside (though actually the dockside sea at the moment was flat and oily) into the snowy peaks of the Alps.

I hung up some clothes in the wardrobe unit, unpacked my typewriter — as a gesture of intent — then decided, on the spur of the moment,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to go out and see Japan one last time, ashore.

I found another taxi prowling the docks and had myself driven to the Motomachi shopping street — I was, after all, a bona fide tourist now. From there, as dusk gathered, I wandered down to Chinatown, where I ended up eventually at a raw-fish restaurant; there I dined, for the last time, on thin strips of my favorite oily underbelly of tuna on pats of rice, washed down with a flask of *tokkyu* sake, returning to the *Lübeck* at ten o'clock or so.

So far, I had met no one on the ship except for Klaus, the "cabin boy."

When I woke up the next morning, to the sound of a breakfast gong being dinned along the corridor past the cabins, the ship was out to sea, leaning gently from port to starboard and back again in the timeless rhythm of voyage.

I showered quickly, scraped my face clean of bristles, dressed, and was in the dining room within seven or eight minutes.

And the public humiliation began: the humiliation that, in the first shocked moments, I believed was directed at myself alone, but that I soon came to realize was to be shared equally amongst all eight of us paying passengers, or victims. For this was the game of the captain and officers.

My own baptism into the game commenced almost immediately.

The captain, a red-faced man with meaty fists, rose from table briskly and introduced me, Gino Landolfi, to Second Officer Herr Jünger (who was traveling with his daughter — she occupied one of the other passenger cabins), Chief Engineer Herr Hausman, and Steward Herr Grünewald, who was busy serving breakfast. And then to the other passengers: there were three British couples, and a Japanese boy of about sixteen. (And of course the fact that so many British people happened to be traveling on a German ship had gone a long way toward precipitating the "game." I blame the British at least partly for the situation, since they had done their best to turn these particular Germans into caricatures of themselves. Yet at the same time, as I was to discover ... *Yet at the same time!*)

We all shared the same huge table, which possessed an inconvenient lip like a billard table's, to prevent plates and glasses from sliding off onto the floor. The *Lübeck* apparently had no stablizers. Thus, it could travel faster, corkscrewing through the waves from side to side. Behind my seat stretched a long window. On the wall opposite me, behind the captain's seat, was a serene mural of the palace of Sans Souci, in Potsdam.

"I must make one thing quite plain, Mr. Landolfi," said the captain, his face suddenly beetroot-red. He actually thumped the breakfast table with his fist, violently jarring the cut-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lery. "This is my ship, and on it you will obey me. Last night you were invited to dinner at this table. *You were not here.* On this ship, in future you do as *I say.* Is that clear? I have always found Italians very unreliable people. Did you not find them so, Herr Grünewald, in the last war? Ah, but for Italy — the weak underbelly. Ah, but for Italy!" And casually he instructed the patrolling steward to pile my plate with sausages.

Conversation around the table resumed, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

It was a conversation conducted entirely in English, about the weather at sea. The Japanese boy remained silent. (It transpired later that he spoke hardly any English, and very poor German. Speaking Japanese myself, I had to take him under my wing, as it were. His father, a fanatical militarist, was sending him to Germany to qualify as a glider pilot, and presumed that he would pick up fluent German *en route.* Unfortunately for the eager youth, nobody was speaking German. This first morning, seeing me rebuked — without understanding the meaning of the words — he stared at me with blank shining enmity, like a Kamikaze pilot.)

To say that I was shocked to the core would be an understatement.

I shall not recount every such incident that so disturbed my serenity and tormented my "Japanese sentiment" that within a few days — with an apparent eternity of time before me, and an infinity of featureless blank water before we were due to catch sight of Panama — I despaired of being able to write a single page of my book, or concentrate effectively upon anything. So much in despair was I that I even thought — almost seriously — of stepping overboard. *Anything,* to be able to drift away from this wretched prison ship! (I should add that the cargo hatches were so loaded down with extra chained containers — two deep — that from the crew deck one needed only to *step* down into the ocean.)

But I must recount a few incidents, simply as a setting for what happened later.

As I have hinted, the British passengers — two of whom had journeyed all the way around the world on the *Lübeck,* with the other four joining at Colombo — and the German officers were engaged in a masque, a mental drama reenacting the national hostilities of the Second World War. These passengers were British officers (with their ladies) under the guard of a brutally polite *Kommandant,* and were determined by various subtle little acts of sabotage — such as witticisms that the captain could not quite understand — to undermine him.

For example, the frail-looking (yet tough-spirited) Mrs. Hetherington

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

asked Herr Grünewald whether, since he had been in the Brownshirts, he had learned how to goose-step; and was it difficult? She soon had the aging steward kicking out his legs in the Nazi march, parading right across the saloon — at precisely the moment that their captain happened to put in an appearance.

But this "innocent" British joke was to rebound; later, we all saw the chief engineer raise his right arm to the captain in the Hitler salute — and the captain responded in kind. For the Germans were subtle, too, in their own way. And in the isolation of the Pacific, with not another ship in sight — except once — this game became immoderately real.

So much so that when one ship did pass us by a couple of weeks later, heading in the opposite direction, all the British passengers — and myself along with them — flooded to the rail, and waved and capered, and cried out, "Help! Help! Rescue us!" Naturally, no one on the other ship heard our cries; but the captain of the *Lübeck* heard us clearly enough, up on his bridge, and descended upon us in baffled fury.

It was during meals that the captain and his officers usually had their revenge. For, though they could not starve us — since we had paid our fares, and it was a point of honor with them that we received full value — they could nevertheless see to it that we were *fed* ... in the spirit of prison warders in charge of a group of hunger-striking suffragettes. The captain would slam his fist on the table — his favorite gesture of emphasis.

"That was good flesh," he would call out to Herr Grünewald. "What flesh was that?" (Well might he ask, since all the meat we ate had been transported deep-frozen all the way from Germany. They did not believe in provisioning in alien foreign ports, such as Colombo or Yokohama. Whether the meat was swine flesh, or sheep flesh, or cow flesh, it all tasted exactly the same.) "Bring more flesh for everyone!"

This was a particular torment for me, with my taste for the subtleties of Japanese cuisine; and it affected Mrs. Hetherington, too, with her weak stomach — though she soldiered on. But it was merely a preliminary to the more exquisitely sadistic rite that the captain decreed for every Sunday morning, in lieu of worship. For then we passengers were all mustered on deck at 11 A.M., the crew was assembled on the lower deck, and a canvas seat was slung from a meathook attached to a balance. We were publicly weighed. This week's weight was called out loudly, and last week's for comparison, from the captain's notebook. The crew either cheered or booed, depending on whether — or by how much — each passenger had put on weight. (In fact, we were soon all putting on weight steadily, with the sole staunch exception of Mrs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hetherington. I presume that she vomited up her meals when she returned to her cabin. Would that I had studied such Yoga.)

The captain's imaginative excuse for this ritual, when I challenged it, was that he must declare the exact "curbside weight" of the *Lübeck* to the authorities at Panama before he could use their canal. So he was merely being methodical and obeying orders. How could one argue with such a —yes — stroke of genius?

Yet if he was "obeying orders," of his own inspired invention, the ship itself was in relative disorder. That we passengers should be attempting to erode his authority was ironic, since his authority was already severely diminished in the eyes of the crew, who saw him as an inconsistent bully, a hypocritical martinet. *They* were not allowed to have women on board, but the captain — on the way out to Japan — had bedded a woman passenger, a Japanese. He had made her his mistress of the voyage.

As though to express the crew's disgust at this miscegenation — or their envy of it — a Chinese cook, the only non-Aryan in the crew, had been "lost overboard" somewhere in the Indian Ocean. The *Lübeck* dutifully returned and sailed a search pattern for the regulation six hours, but his body wasn't found. We suspected, of course, that the Chinese cook had been pushed into the sea by night.

Some fights had even broken out belowdeck; and one man was locked up now, for the duration, with his front teeth knocked out.

All of which leads me to the ship's attitude toward Oriental people —an attitude that was agony to me, not least because I, an Italian (and worse, a Sicilian) was viewed by them as a kind of European Oriental: swarthy, excitable, and unreliable.

Herr Jünger's hobby was home movies; and second only to the torment of meals was the torment of watching his home movies, screened in the saloon after dinner to "entertain" us.

There was no choice in this matter. One could not retire gracefully to one's cabin to curl up with a copy of Chikamatsu's *Drums of the Waves at Horikawa.* Mrs. Granger, who was circumnavigating the world on board the *Lübeck* with her husband as a cheap form of cruise (and bitterly regretting it), attempted to escape one performance, protesting that she had already seen the movies twice over, and making various barbed comments about the quality of the film library in this floating prison camp. The captain actually laid hands on her, twisted her arm behind her back, and — grinning jovially the while — marched her into the saloon and parked her in a seat.

Herr Junger, the second officer, was a large grizzled man with wildly flying, electrified hair, who had been a midshipman on the pocket battle-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ship *Graf Spee* during the Second World War. His wife he always left at home; but for this trip alone his daughter was accompanying him, cruising around the world as a twenty-first birthday treat. A champagne reception would be held a day short of Panama, to mark the actual event — to which we were all, of course, invited. Fraulein Jünger was quite pretty, in a bourgeois way — and she had certain airs and graces, including a way of tossing her head in impatience. She had all the makings, I thought, of a highly *gemütliche Hausfrau.*

Herr Jünger was also traveling with another, inseparable companion: a grotesque red and blue plaster garden gnome named Friedolin — the second officer's mascot and familiar.

The home movies all revolved around the adventures of Friedolin. They were travelogues of the world seen from the viewpoint of a garden gnome — thus demonstrating, presumably, that Herr Jünger was at heart a sentimentalist. (But I shall make no rash generalizations about national characteristics. To me, the cliché is anathema.)

"Here," Herr Jünger would proclaim, "are the Pyramids. And here is Friedolin." And because of the excellence of his movie camera, both were equally in focus. Friedolin appeared to be the same size as the Great Pyramid.

But worse was to come. For Friedolin, with his red nose and his big belly swollen with flesh and beer — this obsene Nibelung — was filled with a mixture of mischievous lust, cruel practical joking, and Aryan pride.

One film sequence showed peasant wherry-boats clustering around the *Lübeck* in some Asian port. The second officer ordered the decks sluiced and the bilges drained, at this moment. How Friedolin laughed from his safe perch on the rail to see the ragged Oriental natives get a soaking. The fact that they had probably possessed a religion, palaces, philosophers, and highly stylized dance-dramas three thousand years ago was of no consequence to Friedolin. His idea of art was cruder.

Cut: to an Asian street, with lovely slender women in *cheongsams* walking away from the camera, ogled by Friedolin as their split skirts hinted at their legs, and their bottoms swayed. The camera zoomed in — telephoto — on one particular bottom, following it down the exotic street.

"Aha," cried Herr Jünger, "she was *not* Friedolin's! She is the one who got away!"

We were treated to many such images of Asian women — most of whom were not to be Friedolin's; yet some of whom....

Well, it appeared that Friedolin sated his lusts in a number of Asian brothels; though, of course, since there were ladies present, this could be no more than hinted at.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This in some way explains our captain's bedding of the Japanese woman passenger — so as not to be outdone by his second officer's gnome.

One of the worst of all the scenes was of rafts of starving Vietnamese refugees in some backwater, observed placidly by Friedolin.

"Too thin for Friedolin, that one!" commented Herr Jünger.

Friedolin was not, of course, being unfaithful; for these people were not quite human, after all.

The camera zoomed in on a despairing face that had retained its beauty.

"Now *that* one, he could enjoy!"

Fraulein Jünger's interest in all these movies was quite different from Friedolin's, as I discovered one day when she talked to me freely on deck, in a moment of excitement.

She had her father's camera with her, having rushed to the rail to do some photography when Herr Jünger sent a crewman running to her cabin to tell her that the *Lübeck* had hit a baby whale.

Now, the *Lübeck* had a very bulbous bow, down at the waterline. Though it might seem that a sharper shape would cleave the water faster, in fact this was not the case. The "bulb" dispersed more drag from the ship. Coupled with the lack of stabilizers, this saved perhaps a day overall in journey time — and profited the owners in proportion.

A little baby whale had indeed crashed onto the "bulb" and lodged there brokenly. Though the beast itself was invisible from where we stood at the rail, its blood was evident enough. Long, thin streamers of red blood washed past us through the blue Pacific water — to the delight of the Fraulein, for this provided a beautiful color contrast.

"Ooh!" she exclaimed, filming assiduously.

The only missing element was Friedolin. Fraulein Jünger had neglected to bring him from her father's cabin, to admire the bloodletting.

Alas. My elbow would dearly have loved to nudge Friedolin accidentally into the sea, just as the Chinese cook —had been nudged. (Though I suspect that the consequences of such an accident — to me — could have been dire. One does not drown with impunity another man's household god.)

"Ooh!"

"Ah," she sighed in disappointment, as the bloodflow slackened. She lowered the camera.

"You forgot Friedolin," I observed, somewhat acidly.

She pouted.

"I think you do not like the movies that my Father makes!"

"Perhaps I take a little exception to Friedolin's viewpoint on the fair sex: namely, from the rear."

"Oh, that is nothing! At home, many wives and husbands are very *in-*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

timate with many other wives and husbands. We think nothing of it. In fact, one is glad to get away for a holiday with just one husband. I am getting married when we return," she added.

"So you're enjoying a rest cure, in advance?"

"Not at all!" She flushed, to think that I was accusing her moralistically of intending to be a person who sleeps around — when her future behavior would be the height of hygenic propriety.

"But I wonder why anyone would endure the monotony of the oceans of the world — for how long: three months in all? — when they are about to get married. It seems odd."

"Since you ask, Herr Landolfi, and since I will never see you again once we disembark, I shall tell you." Fraulein Junger patted her hair, which the breeze was playing with.

I should explain that her face, with its rosy cheeks and bright blue eyes and pert nose, was framed by a coiffure of short black curls. She was a chocolate-box cover.

"I look like a little *Mädchen,* do I not? And I wish to be a woman. I do not look mature enough, to be my Carl's wife — with the company he keeps. His colleagues, their wives and mistresses.... He has sent me away to become mature. When I return, I will look quite different."

"But how?" I wondered.

"You will see, at my birthday party."

"Tell me now, won't you? I'm intrigued."

"That would not be interesting! It would spoil the fun."

"And fun matters, doesn't it?" (Like the bright blood in the sea, I thought.) "*Please* tell me. I'll keep it secret."

She relented.

"Oh, very well. My father has a very special present for me: it is a long black wig. I will wear it when I return for my wedding. I will be a sophisticated woman."

"But ... anyone can buy a wig, surely? You could buy one in Germany, and wear it the next day."

"No. You don't understand. I would be laughed at, in my circle. It would be too sudden: *die Verwandlung* ... the metamorphosis. We have our little rules of etiquette. My long hair must be won. It must be a trophy. An achievement. Anything of that sort must be. A suntan under ultraviolet lamps is *cheating.*"

"You mean, it's like a Red Indian headdress?"

"Oh, I hardly think *that!*" She began to flounce away.

"Wait! Your friends will all conspire to pretend that you grew your hair long on the voyage?" ("For want of anything better to do...")

"Have you noticed," she asked dreamily, "all the beautiful long hair in my father's films? Oh, it is wasted on those women — but only Oriental hair grows so quickly and strongly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That's why they can sell it, and grow a new crop."

"I think they probably sell their hair because they're starving!" I protested, incensed. "They sell it to the wigmakers because it's the only way they can get a little money for a bag of rice. That's even worse than selling one's body: it's selling years of one's life — the years spent growing the hair. It's...."

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

"They aren't a flock of sheep, you know."

Suddenly she looked as though she were about to burst into tears.

"I have told you my secret! And now you pour scorn. You are no gentleman at all."

But I couldn't help recalling the hills of shaved hair inside the concentration camps, as captured on film by the Allies. Yet this thought provided a way out of my dilemma, since I dare not quarrel with her — not on this ship, where she was the apple of her father's eye.

"Well, don't use all your film on the sea," I suggested. "Your father will want to make a movie of your birthday party."

"He has many packs of film in his cabin," she retorted. "And many exposed films that you have not seen!"

This time she did flounce off, all the way to her cabin.

True to her implied promise — or threat — there was another session of home movies two days later after dinner, which had consisted of double helpings of calf flesh.

We were herded into the saloon, the curtains were pulled across the windows, the lights were doused. The screen flickered white numbers, then went into hand-held Technicolor.

A junk was floating in the becalmed blue empty sea, weighted down with people and their possessions. Eighty or ninety people were crowded onto that tiny boat. It was a miracle that it hadn't sunk already.

"This was six months ago," commented Herr Jünger. "These are some boat people. From Vietnam. The Lü*beck* happened upon them in the open sea. But alas, we were not able to take them in tow. Our ship tosses up too much wake. Their junk would have overturned."

Friedolin was beaming down with cheeky benevolence at the refugees.

"And we could hardly take them as deck passengers. The decks were too crowded with containers, as usual."

The camera zoomed in upon the upturned faces, searching. It lingered long upon an extraordinarily beautiful Chinese woman with long black hair, dressed in a dirty torn shirt and skirt. As the *Lübeck* responded to the swell of the sea, Friedolin — lodged in his safe vantage point — seemed to nod.

"Naturally, we gave food and wa-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ter — and radioed their position. They had been stripped of all their gold by a Communist patrol, or pirates."

The next few frames of the film were underexposed and of such brief duration that I wonder whether the camera had been operated accidentally — by Friedolin's plaster fingers? — or whether a whole section of film had been imperfectly edited out.

But I *know* that I saw a woman's semi-naked body lying on a bunk, black hair fanned out around her. And I know that at that very moment Fraulein Jünger glanced in my direction.

The next sequence showed the junk receding into the distance beyond the foaming wake of the *Lübeck*. It was late afternoon by now; the sun had moved on by several hours. Standing in the stern of the junk, in her rags, we could just make out a bald-headed figure (perhaps an old man, perhaps a young woman) who was clutching a bundle of something or other to her; maybe it was food.

"We hope they got towed into port. But who would want them?" sighed Herr Jünger. "Anyway, they fed well from us — though I expect too much flesh would make their stomachs sick."

"*Did* they get rescued?" inquired Mrs. Hetherington.

"I do not know. We never heard. There are too many junks like that, adrift in the China seas. It is the fault of Communism. Anyway, we did our duty."

"Poor souls — but what can one do?" asked Mrs. Hetherington. "There are too many immigrants in our own country already. One must be charitable, but they upset the economy."

For a while, a conspiracy of mutual silence seemed to prevail between the German officers and the British passengers. And I wondered whether I, alone of all the passengers, guessed what had happened....

We had been at sea for an eternity, and had traversed as great an infinity as you can find on earth — but the next day we should arrive in the roads outside Panama, where we would see ships again, queuing up to traverse the canal.

And so Fraulein Jünger's birthday had arrived. And she was twenty-one.

The celebration was to commence as soon as it was evening, marked by the dipping of the sun below the horizon. The signal for the popping of the champagne corks would be no launching of fireworks into the sky —which, this close to the convergence of the shipping lanes, might be misinterpreted as the firing of distress maroons. Not fireworks, then, but a remarkable natural phenomenon, which we hoped would repeat itself this sundown. (And if it didn't, never mind! It was hardly an omen....) I refer to the "green flash." On cloudless,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

calm, hot days such as this one in the Pacific, if you gaze at the horizon just after the north pole of the sun has sunk, a bright green light flashes low along the sea horizon, because of some atmospheric characteristic, for no more than a second or two.

We all gathered to watch for it: passengers, officers, and the fraulein. We had seen the green flash faintly, perhaps three times in the past few weeks — and the search for it had taken on a kind of "mystical" significance, as though that flash of light were racing across the whole of the Pacific from Asia, to catch up with us; as though, could we film it and slow it down incredibly, we might see in that flash images of pagodas and jungles, paddy fields, Mount Fuji, Angkor Wat — as if this were the oceanic equivalent of a desert mirage, of mountains reflected from far away.

"There!" cried Mrs. Hetherington, pointing unnecessarily — since all our eyes were peeled.

It was the brightest that the green flash had ever been. And already it was gone; the sea horizon was as ever.

The first champagne cork promptly popped; and a jet of froth leaped the rail.

Soon all the glasses were full, and the captain made a little speech. We all toasted Fraulein Jünger, and she laughed merrily, her chocolate-box face wreathed in smiles.

Herr Jünger produced a round box — like a hatbox — and presented it.

The fraulein tore the ribbon off, letting it flutter away into the sea. It coiled on the water like a red snake rushing sternward.

From the box the fraulein pulled out a long black wig. It dangled black and glossy, rich and full.

"Ohh!" she exclaimed, and rushed inside to try it on before a mirror, returning perhaps five minutes later, transformed. And then the party really got under way.

We all drank too much, even the British.

Fortunately — or unfortunately — it was then time to eat dinner. Some ballast.

"Oh, wait," called Fraulein Jünger, as we filed around the table. She caressed her long new hair. "I think I do not wish to get flesh-juice on this."

"Gravy," the captain corrected her. "*Fleischsaft* is translated into English as 'gravy.' "

"Of course," agreed her father. For this special occasion he had brought Friedolin in and placed him in the center of the tablecloth, to preside. "Friedolin would be so unhappy. That is a very special wig, for a very special daughter. It is not a mongrel, made of many different people's hairs. it is all from the head of one woman, whom I paid well. I bought it specially, and had it made up specially for you, *Liebchen*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The fraulein rushed away to deposit her new hair in her cabin, while we took our seats.

Two minutes later, she returned, frowning. She still wore the wig. The apples of her cheeks were blanched.

"But I can't get it off!" She surveyed the British passengers. "What joke is this? Someone has poured glue inside it."

"Nonsense," said Herr Jünger. "You felt the inside before you put it on. It slips off easily."

"But it *won't* come off."

"Let me. Maybe it's a little tight."

He tried, while Herr Grünewald hovered, impatient to serve the evening's flesh. The fraulein's father wrestled with his daughter's head; and she cried out in pain.

"Stop!"

"Tugging your own hair, is it?" asked Mrs. Hetherington with a semblance of sympathy.

"No." The fraulein held her head. "Not my hair. It's as if wires are in my head. Sticking in my brain. Like live nerves. I'm confused. My thoughts are crazy — they're not human words! I can't stand the pain when you pull."

The wig wouldn't come off at all. It was as though the green flash, from Asia, had welded the wig to her head.

The fraulein had to be given a sedative, and taken to lie down.

That evening, uniquely, there were no second helpings of flesh — though Friedolin watched over the soured feast with undiminished, tubby joviality.

Nor would the wig come off the next day. It clung like a black leech.

We had arrived at Panama, and we floated on a flat blue expanse behind several other merchant vessels, all pointing toward the cleft of the Americas.

The fraulein sat out on the deck in the sunshine, which was much hotter now that we were close to land. An old sheet was wrapped round her. One of the crewmen, an electrician who doubled as ship's barber, had been ordered up with his shears to cut the alien hair from her head. Somehow it seemed very important to throw every last strand over the side into the ocean, to drift back toward Asia, before the *Lübeck* quit the Pacific for a different sea.

As the barber made the first cut, Fraulein Jünger screamed out terribly.

"No!" She snatched the shears from him, then clutched her head. "The pain! It's alive. It's like cutting my flesh with fire! Her hair is living. It's put down roots. She's dead — I know she's dead. But she's alive in it! Her soul flowed into her hair — like Samson, his strength!"

Then she babbled in tongues for a while, as though talking to herself with two voices.

It couldn't be true, but.... Appalled, there was nothing that any of us

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could think of to do or say. Except, perhaps, to beg forgiveness of something. Or of someone, whose language we couldn't speak.

The ship tooted.

"We *have* to move, to sail through," the captain said. "*Now.* The pilot's coming. Herr Jünger, please!"

Fraulein Jünger dragged the torn sheet around her like the thinnest peasant robe. She still clasped the shears in one hand — and I wondered whether the very same shears had been borrowed by Herr Jünger from the electrician six months ago. She stared ahead wildly toward the green jungle fringe of Panama, the Asia of the Americas haunted by natives in their rags. Her mind deranged by another dead mind.

And I was guilty, too. As guilty as anyone. For I had drunk champagne at the fraulein's birthday. And I had not stepped overboard, weeks ago, into the warm oblivion of the Pacific.

How lush and rich the fraulein's hair was. How it thrived on her. She looked like a new woman. And she would be alone with us all in the Sargasso Sea, then the Atlantic, for another month, almost.

How would Friedolin survive that journey?

Or any of us. Or any of us.

Collector's Item

GRAVEN IMAGES edited by Barry N. Malzberg and Edward L. Ferman. This hardcover anthology features three original novellas about science fiction and the arts by Richard Frede, Charles L. Grant and Barry Malzberg. We offer a limited number of these books (published in 1977), all in fine condition and signed by the editors. $5.00 each from:

Mercury Press, Inc., P.O Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ben Bova and Sam Gunn ("Sam Gunn," October 1983) return in a new tale in which the legendary astronaut wangles command of Earth's biggest space station.

Isolation Area

BY
BEN BOVA

They faced each other suspiciously, floating weightlessly in emptiness.

The black man was tall, long-limbed, loose, gangling; on Earth he might have made a pro basketball player. His utilitarian coveralls were standard issue, frayed at the cuffs and so worn that whatever color they had been originally had long since faded into a dull gray. They were clean and pressed to a razor sharpness, though. The insignia patch on his left shoulder said *Administration.* A strictly non-regulation belt of royal blue, studded with rough lumps of meteoric gold and clamped by a heavy gold buckle, cinched his narrow waist and made him look even taller and leaner.

He eyed the reporter warily. She was young, and the slightly greenish cast to her pretty features told him that she had never been in orbit before. Her pale blonde hair was shoulder length, he judged, but she had followed the instructions given to groundlings and tied it up in a zero-gee snood. Her coveralls were spanking new white. She filled them nicely enough, although she had more of a figure than he cared for.

Frederick Mohammed Malone was skeptical to the point of being hostile toward this female interloper. The reporter could see the resentment smoldering in the black man's eyes. Malone's face was narrow, almost gaunt, with a trim little Vandyke jutting out from his chin. His forehead was high, receding; his hair cropped close to the skull. She guessed Malone's age at somewhere in the early forties, although she knew that living in zero gravity could make a person look much younger than his or her calendar age.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She tried to restart their stalled conversation. "I understand that you and Sam Gunn were, uh, friends."

"Why're you doing a story on Sam?" Malone asked, his voice low and loaded with distrust.

The two of them were in Malone's "office," actually an observation blister in the central hub of space station Alpha. Oldest and still biggest of the Earth-orbiting stations, Alpha was built on the old wheels-within-wheels scheme. The outermost rim, where most of the staff lived and worked, spun at a rate that gave it almost a full Earth gravity. Two-thirds of the way toward the hub, there was a wheel that spun at the Moon's one-sixth gee. The hub itself, of course, was for all practical purposes at zero gee, weightless.

Malone's aerie consisted of one wall, on which were located a semicircular sort of desk and communications center, a bank of viewing screens that were all blankly gray at the moment, and an airtight hatch that led to the spokes that radiated out to the various wheels. The rest of the chamber was a transparent plastic bubble, from which Malone could watch the station's loading dock—and the overwhelming majesty of the huge, curved, incredibly blue- and white-flecked Earth as it slid past endlessly, massive, brilliant, ever-changing, ever-beautiful.

To the reporter, though, it seemed as if they were hanging in empty space itself, unprotected by anything at all, and falling, falling, falling toward the ponderous world of their birth. The background rumble of the bearings that bore the massive station's rotation while the hub remained static sounded to her like the insistent bass growl of a giant grinding wheel that was pressing the breath out of her.

She swallowed bile, felt it burn in her throat, and tried to concentrate on the job at hand.

She said to Malone, "I've been assigned to do a biography of Mr. Gunn for the Solar Network. . . ."

Despite himself, Malone suddenly grinned. "First time I ever heard him called *Mr.* Gunn."

"Oh?" The reporter's microchip recorder, clipped to her belt, was already on, of course. "What did the people here call him?"

That lean, angular face took on an almost thoughtful look. "Oh . . . Sam, mostly. 'That tricky bastard,' a good many times." Malone actually laughed. "Plenty times I heard him called a womanizing son of a bitch."

"What did you call him?"

The suspicion came back into Malone's eyes. "He was my friend. I called him Sam."

Silence stretched between them, hanging as weightlessly as their bodies. The reporter turned her head slightly and found herself staring at the vast bulk of Earth. Her mind screamed as if she were falling down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an elevator shaft. Her stomach churned queasily. She could not tear her eyes away from the world drifting past, so far below them, so compellingly near. She felt herself being drawn drawn toward it, dropping through the emptiness, spinning down the deep, swirling vortex. . . .

Malone's long-fingered hand squeezed her shoulder hard enough to hurt. She snapped her attention to his dark, unsmiling face as he grasped her other shoulder and held her firmly in his strong hands.

"You were drifting," he said, almost in a whisper.

"Was I . . .?"

"It's all right," he said. "Gets everybody, at first. Don't be scared. You're perfectly safe."

His powerful hands steadied her. She fought down the panic surging inside.

"If you got to upchuck, go ahead and do it. Nothing to be ashamed of." His grin returned. "Only use the bags they gave you, please."

He looked almost handsome when he smiled, she thought. After another moment, he released her. She took a deep breath and dabbed at the beads of perspiration on her forehead. The retch bags that the technicians had attached to her belt were a symbol to her now. I won't need them, she insisted to herself. I'm not going to let this get me.

"Feel better?" he asked.

There was real concern in his eyes.

"I think I'll be all right. Thanks."

"*Por nada,*" he said. "I appreciate your coming out here to the hub for the interview."

His attitude had changed, she saw. The sullenness had thawed. He had insisted on conducting the interview in the station's zero-gravity area. He had allowed no alternative. But she was grateful that the shell of distrust seemed to have cracked.

It took several moments before she could say, "I'm not here to do a hatchet job on Mr. Gunn."

Malone made a small shrug. "Doesn't make much difference, one way or t'other. He's dead; nothing you say can hurt him now."

"But we know so little about him. I suppose he's the most famous enigma in the solar system."

The black man made no response.

"The key question, I guess . . . the thing our viewers will be most curious about, is why Sam Gunn exiled himself up here. Why did he turn his back on Earth?"

Malone snorted with disdain. "He didn't! Those motherfuckers turned their backs on him."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story," Malone said.

"That's all right. I've got as much time as it takes." Even as she said it, the reporter wished that Malone would volunteer to return back to the outer wheel, where gravity was normal. But she dared not ask the man to leave his office. Once a subject

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

starts talking, never interrupt! That was the cardinal rule of a successful interview. Besides, she was determined not to let weightlessness get the better of her.

"Would you believe," Malone was saying, "that it all started with a cold?"

"A cold?"

"Sam came down with a cold in the head. That's how the whole thing began."

"Tell me about it."

Sam was a feisty little bastard—Malone reminisced—full of piss and vinegar. If there were ten different ways in the regulations to do a job, he'd find an eleventh, maybe a twelfth or a fourteenth, just because he couldn't abide being bound by the regs. A free spirit, I guess you'd call him.

He'd had his troubles with the brass in Houston *and* Washington. Why he ever became an astronaut in the first place is beyond me. Maybe he thought he'd be like a pioneer out on the frontier, on his own, 'way out in space. *How* he made it through training and into flight operations is something I'll never figure out. I just don't feature Sam sitting still long enough to get through kindergarten, let alone flight school and astronaut training.

Anyway, when I first met him, he was finished as an astronaut. He had put in seven years, which he said was a biblical amount of time, and he wanted out. And the agency was glad to get rid of him, believe me. But he had this cold in the head, and they couldn't let him go back Earthside until it cleared up.

"Six billion people down there with colds, the flu, bad sinuses, and postnasal drips, and the assholes in Houston won't let me go back until this goddamned sniffle clears up."

Those were the first words Sam ever said to me. He had been assigned to my special isolation ward, where I had reigned alone for nearly four years. Alpha was under construction then. We were in the old Mac-Dac Shack, a glorified tin can that passed for a space station back in those primitive days. It didn't spin, it just hung there; everything inside was weightless.

My isolation ward was a cramped compartment with four zero-gee bunks jammed into it, together with lockers to stow personal gear. Nobody but me had ever been in it until that morning. Sam shuffled over to the bed next to mine, towing his travel bag like a kid with a sinking balloon.

"Just don't sneeze in my direction, Sniffles," I growled at him.

That stopped Sam for about half a second. He gave me that lopsided grin of his—his face sort of looked like a scuffed-up soccer ball, kind of round, scruffy. Little wart of a nose in the middle of it. Longest hair I ever

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saw on a man who works in space; hair length was one of the multitudinous points of contention between Sam and the agency. His eyes sparkled. Kind of an odd color, not quite blue, not really green. Sort of in-between.

"Malone, huh?" He read the name tag clipped over my bunk.

"Frederick Mohammed Malone."

"Jesus Christ, they put me next to an Arab!"

But he stuck out his hand. Sam was really a little guy; his hand was almost like a baby's. After a moment's hesitation, I swallowed it in mine.

"Sam," he told me, knowing I could see his last name on the name tag pinned to his coveralls.

"I'm not even a Muslim," I said. "My father was, though. First one in Arkansas."

"Good for him." Sam disengaged his cleated shoes from the grillwork floor and floated up onto the cot. His travel bag hung alongside. He ignored it and sniffed at the air. "Goddamned hospitals all smell like somebody's dying. What're you in for? Hangnail or something?"

"Something," I said. "Acquired-immune-deficiency syndrome."

His eyes went round. "AIDS?"

"It's not contagious. Not unless we make love."

"I'm straight."

"I'm not."

"Terrific. Just what I need, a gay black Arab with AIDS." But he was grinning at me.

I had seen plenty of guys back away from me once they knew I had AIDS. Some of them had a hang-up about gays. Others were scared out of their wits that they would catch AIDS from me, or from the medical personnel or equipment. I had more than one reason to know how a leper felt, back in those days.

Sam's grin faded into a frown. "How the hell did the medics put me in here if you've got AIDS? Won't you catch my cold? Isn't that dangerous for you?"

"I'm a guinea pig . . ."

"You don't look Italian."

"Look," I said, "if you're gonna stay in here, keep off the ethnic jokes, O.K.?"

He shrugged.

"The medics think they've got my case arrested. New treatment that the genetic researchers have come up with."

"I get it. If you don't catch my cold, you're cured."

"They never use words like *cured*. But that's the general idea."

"So I'm a guinea pig, too."

"No, you are a part of the apparatus for this experiment. A source of infection. A bag of viruses. A host of bacteria. Germ city."

Sam hooked his feet into his bunk's webbing and gave me a dark look. "And this is the guy who doesn't like ethnic jokes."

The Mac-Dac Shack had been one of the first space stations the agency

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had put up. It wasn't fancy, but for years it had served as a sort of research laboratory, mainly for medical work. Naturally, with a lot of M.D.'s in it, the Shack sort of turned into a floating hospital in orbit. With all the construction work going on in those days, there was a steady stream of injured workmen and technicians.

Then some bright bureaucrat got the idea of using the Shack as an isolation ward, where the medics could do research on things like AIDS, Legionnaires' disease, the New Delhi virus, and various paralytic afflictions that required either isolation or zero gravity or both. The construction crew infirmary was moved over to the yet-unfinished Alpha, while the Shack was turned into a pure research facility with various isolation wards for guinea pigs like me.

Sam stayed in my ward for three, four days; I forget the exact time. He was like an energetic little bee, buzzing all over the place, hardly ever still for a minute. In zero gee, of course, he could literally climb the curved walls of the ward and hover up on the ceiling. He terrified the head nurse in short order by hanging near the ceiling or hiding behind one of the bunks and then launching himself at her like a missile when she showed up with the morning's assortment of needles.

Never once did Sam show the slightest qualm at having his blood sampled alongside mine. I've seen guys get violent from their fear that they'd get a needle contaminated by me, and catch what I had. But Sam never even blinked. Me, I never liked needles. Couldn't abide them. Couldn't look when the nurse stuck me; couldn't even look when she stuck somebody else.

"All the nurses are women," Sam noticed by the end of his first day.

"All six of them," I affirmed.

"The doctors are all males?"

"Eight men, four women."

"That leaves two extra women for us."

"For you. I'm on the other side."

"How come all women nurses?" he wondered.

"I think it's because of me. They don't want to throw temptation in my path."

He started to frown at me, but it turned into that lopsided grin. "They didn't think about *my* path."

He caused absolute havoc among the nurses. With the single-minded determination of a sperm cell seeking blindly for an ovum, Sam pursued them all: the fat little redhead, the cadaverous ash-blonde, the really good-looking one, the kid who still had acne—all of them, even the head nurse, who threatened to inject him with enough estrogen to grow boobs on him if he didn't leave her and her crew alone.

Nothing deflected Sam. He would be gone for long hours from the ward, and when he'd came back, he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would be grinning from ear to ear. As politely as I could, I'd ask him if he had been successful.

"It matters not if you win or lose," he would say. "It's how you play the game . . . as long as you get laid."

When he finally left the isolation ward, it seemed as if we had been friends for years. And it was damned quiet in there without him. I was alone again. I missed him. I realized how many years it had been since I'd had a friend.

I sank into a real depression of self-pity and despair. I had caught Sam's cold, sure enough. I was hacking and sneezing all day and night. One good thing about zero gravity is that you can't have a postnasal drip. One bad thing is that all the fluids accumulate in your sinuses and give you a headache of monumental proportions. The head nurse seemed to take special pleasure in inflicting upon me the indignity of forcing tubes up my nose to drain the sinuses.

The medics were overjoyed. Their guinea pig was doing something interesting. Would I react to the cold like any normal person and get over it after a few days? Or would the infection spread and worsen, turn into pneumonia, or maybe kill me? I could see them writing their learned papers in their heads every time they examined me, four times a day.

I was really unfit company for anyone, including myself. I went on for months that way, just wallowing in my own misery. Other patients came and went: an African kid with a new strain of polio, an asthmatic who had developed a violent allergy to dust, a couple of burn victims from the Alpha construction crew. I stayed while they were treated and sent home. Then, without any warning, Sam showed up again.

"Hello, Omar, how's the tentmaking business?" My middle name had become Omar, as far as he was concerned.

I gaped at him. He was wearing the powder blue coveralls and shoulder insignia of Global Technologies, Inc., which in those days was just starting to grow into the interplanetary conglomerate it has become.

"What the hell you doing back here?" My voice was a full octave higher than normal, I was so surprised. And glad.

"I work here."

"Say what?"

He ambled over to me in the zero-gee strides we all learn to make: maintain just enough contact with the grillwork on the floor to keep from floating off toward the ceiling. As Sam approached my bunk, the head nurse pushed through the ward's swinging doors with a trayful of the morning's indignities for me.

"Global Technologies just won the contract for running this tin can. The medical staff still belongs to the government, but everybody else will be replaced by Global employees. I'll be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in charge of the whole place."

Behind him, the head nurse's eyes goggled, her mouth sagged open, and the tray slid from her hand. It just hung there, revolving slowly, as she turned a full 180 and flew out of the ward without a sound.

"You're in charge of this place?" I laughed. "No shit? "

"Only after meals," Sam said. "I've got a five-year contract."

We got to be *really* friends then. Not lovers. Sam was the most heterosexual man I have ever seen. One of the shrinks aboard the station said Sam had a Casanova complex: he had to take a shot at any and every female creature he saw. I don't know how good his batting average was, but he surely kept busy—and happy.

"The thrill is in the chase, Omar, not the capture," he said to me many times. Then he would always add, "As long as you get laid."

But Sam could be a true friend, caring, understanding, bringing out the best in a man. Or a woman, for that matter. I saw him help many of the station's female employees—nurses, technicians, scientists—completely aside from his amorous pursuits. He knew when to put his Casanova complex in the back seat. He was a helluva good administrator, and a leader. Everybody like him. Even the head nurse grew to grant him a grudging respect, although she certainly didn't want anybody to know it, especially Sam.

Of course, knowing Sam, you might expect that he would have trouble with the chain of command. He had gotten himself out of the space agency, and it was hard to tell who was happier about it, him or the agency. You could hear sighs of relief from Houston and Washington all the way up where we were, the agency was so glad to be rid of the pestering little squirt who never followed regulations.

It didn't take long for Sam to find out that Global Technologies, Inc., had its own bureaucracy, its own set of regulations, and its own frustrations.

"You'd think a multibillion-dollar company would want to make all the profits it can," Sam grumbled to me, about six months after he had returned to the Shack. "Half the facilities on Alpha are empty, right? They overbuilt, right? I show them how to turn Alpha into a tourist resort, and they reject the goddamned idea. 'We're not in the tourism business,' they say. Goddamned assholes."

I found it hard to believe that Global Tech didn't understand what a bonanza they could reap from space tourism. But they just failed to see it. Sam spent weeks muttering about faceless bureaucrats who sat on their brains, and how much money a zero-gravity honeymoon hotel could make. It didn't do him a bit of good. At least, that's what I thought at the time.

The big crisis was mostly my fault.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Looking back on it, if I could have figured out a different way to handle things, I would have. But you know how it is when your emotions are all churned up; you don't see any alternatives. Truthfully, I still don't see how I could have done anything else except what I did.

They told me I was cured.

Yeah, I know I said they never used words like that; but they changed their tune. After more than five years in the isolation ward of the station, the medics asked me to join them in the conference room. I expected another one of their dreary meetings; they made me attend them at least once a month, said it was important for me to "maintain a positive interaction with the research staff." So I dragged myself down to the conference room.

They were all grinning at me, around the table. Buckets of champagne stood at either end, with more bottles stashed where the slide projector usually hung.

I was cured. The genetic manipulations had finally worked. My body's immune system was back to normal. My case would be in the medical journals; future generations would bless my memory (but not my name; they would protect my anonymity). I could go back home, back to Earth.

Only, I didn't want to go.

"You don't want to go?" Sam's pudgy little face was screwed up into an incredulous expression that mixed in equal amounts of surprise, disapproval, and curiosity.

"Back to Earth? No, I don't want to go," I said. "I want to stay here. Or maybe go live on Alpha or one of the new stations they're building."

"But why?" Sam asked.

We were in his office, a tiny little cubbyhole that had originally been a storage locker for fresh food. I mean, space in the Shack was *tight*. I thought I could still smell onions or something faintly pungent. Sam had walled the chamber with a blue-colored spongy plastic, so naturally it came to be known as the Blue Grotto. There were no chairs in the Grotto, we just hung in midair. You could nudge your back against the slightly rough wall surfacing and that would hold you in place well enough. There wasn't much room to drift around in. Two people were all the chamber could hold comfortably. Sam's computer terminal was built into the wall; there was no furniture in the Grotto, no room for any.

"I got nothing to go back there for," I answered, "and a lot of crap waiting for me that I would just as soon avoid."

"But it's *Earth,*" he said. "The world . . . ."

So I told him about it. The whole story, end to end.

I had been a soldier, back in that nasty little bitch of a war in Mexico. Nothing glamorous, not even patriotism. I had joined the army because it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was the only way for a kid from my part of Little Rock to get a college education. They paid for my education, and right after they pinned a lieutenant's gold bars on my shoulders, they stuck me inside a heavy tank. Well, you know how well the tanks did in those hills. Nothing to shoot at but cactus, and we were great big noisy targets for those smart little missiles they brought in from Czechoslovakia or wherever.

They knocked out my tank. I was the only one of the crew to survive, and I wound up in an army hospital where they tried to put my spine back together again. That's where I contracted AIDS, from one of the male nurses who wanted to prove to me that I hadn't lost my virility. He was a very sweet kid, very caring. But I never saw him again once they decided to ship me to the isolation ward up in orbit.

Now it was five years later. I was cured of AIDS, a sort of anonymous hero, but everything else was still the same. Earth would still be the same, except that every friend I ever knew was five years' distance from me. My parents had killed themselves in an automobile wreck while I was in college. I had no sisters or brothers. I had no job prospects: soldiers coming back home five years later after the war aren't greeted with parades and confetti, and all the computer stuff I had learned in college was obsolete by now. Not even the army used that kind of equipment anymore.

And Earth was dirty, crowded, noisy, dangerous—it was also *heavy,* a full one gee. I tried a couple of days in the one-gee wheel over at Alpha and knew that I could never live in Earth's full gravity again. Not voluntarily.

Sam listened to all this in complete silence, the longest I had ever known him to go without opening his mouth. He was totally serious, not even the hint of a smile. I could see that he understood.

"Down there I'd be just another nobody, an ex-soldier with no place to go. I can't handle the gravity, no matter what the physical therapists think they can do for me. I want to stay here, Sam. I want to make something of myself, and I can do it here, not back there. The best I can be back there is another veteran on a disability pension. What kind of a job could I get? I can *be* somebody up here, I know I can."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "You're sure? You're absolutely certain this is what you want?"

I nodded. "I can't go back, Sam," I pleaded. "I just can't."

The faintest hint of a grin twitched at the corners of hs mouth. "O.K., pal. How'd you like to go into the hotel business with me?"

You see, Sam had already been working for some time on his own ideas about space tourism. If Global Tech wouldn't go for a hotel facility

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over on Alpha, complete with zero-gee honeymoon suites, then Sam figured he could get somebody else interested in the idea. The people who like to bad-mouth Sam say that he hired me to cover his ass so he could spend his time working on his tourist hotel idea, while he was still collecting a salary from Global. That isn't the way it happened at all; it was really the other way around.

Sam hired me as a consultant and paid me out of his own pocket. To this day I don't know where he got the money. I suspect it was from some of the financial people he was always talking to, but you never knew, with Sam. He had an inexhaustible fund of rabbits up his sleeves. Whenever I asked him about it, he just grinned at me and told me not to ask questions. I was never an employee of Global Technologies. And Sam worked full time for them, eight hours a day, six days a week, and then some. They got their salary's worth out of him. More. But that didn't mean he couldn't spend nights, Sundays, and the odd holiday here and there wooing financiers and lawyers who might come up with the risk capital he needed for his hotel. Sure, sometimes he did his own thing during Global's regular office hours. But he worked plenty of overtime hours for Global, too. They got their money's worth out of Sam.

Of course, once I was no longer a patient whose bills were paid by the government, Global sent word up from corporate headquarters that I was to be shipped back Earthside as soon as possible. Sam interpreted that to mean, when he was good and ready. Weeks stretched into months. Sam fought a valiant delaying action, matching every query of theirs with a detailed memorandum and references to obscure government health and safety regulations. It would take Global's lawyers a month to figure out what the hell Sam was talking about, and then frame an answer.

In the meantime, he moved me from the old isolation ward into a private room—a coffin-sized cubbyhole—and insisted that I start paying for my rent and food. Since Sam was paying me a monthly consultant's stipend, he was collecting my rent and food money out of the money he was giving me as his consultant. It was all done with the Shack's computer system, no cash ever changed hands. I had the feeling that there were some mighty weird subroutines running around inside that computer, all of them programmed by Sam.

While all this was going on, the Shack was visited by a rather notorious U.S. senator, one of the most powerful men in the government. He was a wizened, shriveled old man who had been in the Senate almost half a century. I thought little of it; we were getting a constant trickle of VIPs in those days. The bigwigs usually went to Alpha, so much so that we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

began calling it the Big Wheels' Big Wheel. Most of them avoided the Shack; I guess they were scared of getting contaminated from our isolation ward patients. But a few of the VIPs made their way to the Shack, now and then. Sam took personal charge of the senator and his entourage, and showed him more attention and courtesy than I had ever seen him lavish upon a visitor before. Or since, for that matter. Sam, kowtowing to an authority figure? It astounded me at the time, but I laughed it off and forgot all about it soon enough.

Then, some six months after the senator's visit, when it looked as if Sam had run out of time and excuses to keep me in the Shack and I would have to pack my meager bag and head down the gravity well to spend the rest of my miserable days in some overcrowded ghetto city, Sam came prancing weightlessly into my microminiaturized living quarters, waving a flimsy sheet of paper.

"What's that?" I knew it was a straight line, but he wasn't going to tell me unless I asked.

"A new law." He was smirking, canary feathers all over his chin.

"First time I ever seen you happy about some new regulation."

"Not a regulation," he corrected me. "A *law*. A federal law, duly passed by the U.S. Congress and just signed today by the president."

I wanted to play it cool, but he had me too curious. "What's it say? Why's it so important?"

"It says"—he made a flourish that sent him drifting slowly toward the ceiling as he read—" 'No person residing aboard a space facility owned by the United States or by a corporation or other legal entity licensed by the United States may be compelled to leave said facility without due process of law.' "

My reply was something profound, like, "Huh?"

His scrunty little face beaming, Sam said, "It means that Global can't force you back Earthside! As long as you can pay the rent, Omar, they can't evict you."

"You joking?" I couldn't believe it.

"No joke. I helped write this masterpiece, kiddo," he told me. "Remember when old Senator Winnebago was up here, last year?"

The senator was from Wisconsin, but his name was not Winnebago. He had been a powerful enemy of the space program—until his doctors told him that degenerative arthritis was going to make him a pain-racked cripple unless he could live in a low-gee environment. All of a sudden he became a big space freak. His visit to the Shack had proved what his doctors had told him: in zero gee the pains that hobbled him disappeared and he felt twenty years younger. That's when Sam convinced him to sponsor the "pay your own way" law, which provided that neither the gov-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ernment nor a private company operating a space facility could force a resident out as long as he or she was able to pay the going rate for accommodations.

"Hell, they've got laws that protect tenants from eviction in New York and every other city," Sam said. "Why not here?"

I was damned glad of it. Overjoyed, in fact. It meant that I could stay, that I wouldn't be forced to go back Earthside and drag myself around at my full weight. What I didn't realize at the time, of course, was that Sam would eventually have to use that law for himself. Obviously, *he* had seen ahead far enough to know that he would need such protection, sooner or later. Did he get the law written for his own selfish purposes? Sure he did. But it served *my* purpose, too, and Sam knew that when he was bending the senator's tin ear. That was good enough for me. Still is.

For the better part of another year, I served as Sam's legman—a job I found interesting and amusingly ironic. I shuttled back and forth from the Shack to Alpha, generally to meet big-shot businesspersons visiting the Big Wheel. When Sam was officially on duty for Global, which was most of the time, he'd send me over to Alpha to meet the visitors, settle them down, and talk to them about the money that a tourist facility would make. I would just try to keep them happy until Sam could shake loose and come over to meet them himself. Then he would weave a golden web of words, describing how fantastic an orbital tourist facility would be, bobbing weightlessly around the room in his enthusiasm, pulling numbers out of the air to show how indecently huge would be the profit that investors would make.

"And the biggest investors will get their own suites, all for themselves," Sam promised, "complete with every luxury—and every service that the staff can provide." He would wink hard enough to dislocate an eyelid at that point, to make certain the prospective investor knew what he meant.

I met some pretty interesting people that way: Texas millionaires, Wall Street financiers, Hollywood sharks, a couple of bullnecked types I thought might be Mafia but turned out to be in the book and magazine distribution business, even a few very nice young ladies who were looking for "good causes" in which to invest. Sam did not spare them his "every service that the staff can provide" line, together with the wink. They giggled and blushed.

"It's gonna happen!" Sam kept saying. Each time we met a prospective backer, his enthusiasm rose to a new pitch. No matter how many times the prospect eventually turned sour, no matter how often we were disappointed, Sam never lost his faith in the idea or in the inevitability of its fruition.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's gonna happen, Omar. We're going to create the first tourist hotel in space. And you're going to have a share of it, pal. Mark my words."

When we finally got a tentative approval from a consortium of Greek and Italian shipping people, Sam nearly rocked the old Shack out of orbit. He whooped and hollered and zoomed around the place like a crazy billiard ball. He threw a monumental party for everybody in the Shack—doctors, nurses, patients, technicians, administrative staff, security guards, visitors, and even the one consultant who lived there: me. Where he got the caviar and fresh Brie and other stuff, I still don't know. But it was a party none of us will ever forget. It started Saturday at 5 P.M., the close of the official work week. It ended, officially, Monday at 8 A.M. There are those who believe, though, that it's still going on over there at the Shack.

Several couples sort of disappeared during the party. The Shack isn't so big that people can get lost in it, but they just seemed to vanish. Most of them showed up, looking tired and sheepish, by Monday morning. Three of those couples eventually got married. One pair of them was stopped by a security guard when they tried to go out an air lock while stark naked.

Sam himself engaged in a bit of EVA with one of the nurses, a tiny little elf of fragile beauty and uncommon bravery. She snuggled into a pressure suit with Sam, and the two of them made several orbits around the Shack, outside, propelled by nothing more than their own frenetic pulsations and Newton's third law of motion.

Two days after the party, however, the Beryllium Blonde showed up.

Her real name was Jennifer Marlow, and she was as splendidly beautiful as a woman can be. A figure right out of a high school boy's wettest dreams. A perfect face, with eyes of china blue and thickly glorious hair like a crown of shining gold. She staggered every male who saw her, she stunned even me, and she sent Sam into a complete tailspin.

To top things off, she was Global Technology's ace troubleshooter. Her official title was Administrative Assistant (Special Projects) to the President. The word we got from Earthside was that she had a mind like a steel trap, and a vagina much the same.

The official reason for her visit was to discuss Sam's letter of resignation with him.

"You stay right beside me," Sam insisted as we drifted down the Shack's central corridor, toward the old conference room. "I won't be able to control myself if I'm in there alone with her."

His face was as white as the Moon's. He looked like a man in shock.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Will you be able to control yourself *with* me in there?" I wondered.

"If I can't, rap me on the head. Knock me out. Give me a Vulcan nerve pinch. Anything! Just don't let me go zonkers over her."

I smiled.

"I'm not kidding, Omar!" Sam insisted. "Why do you think they sent her up here, instead of some flunky? They know I'm susceptible. God knows how many scalps she's got nailed to her tepee."

I grabbed his shoulder and dug my cleats into the corridor's floor grid. We skidded to a stop.

"Look," I said, "maybe you want to avoid meeting with her altogether. I can represent you. I'm not . . . uh, susceptible."

His eyes went so wide I could see white all around the pupils. "Are you nuts? Miss a chance to be in the same room with her? I want to be protected, Omar, but not that much!"

What could I do with him? He was torn in half. He knew the Beryllium Blonde was here to talk him out of resigning, but he couldn't resist the opportunity of letting her try her wiles on him any more than Odysseus could resist listening to the Sirens.

Like a couple of schoolboys dragging ourselves down to the principal's office, we made our way slowly along the corridor and pushed through the door to the conference room. She was already seated at the head of the table, wearing a Chinese red jumpsuiit that fit her like skin. I gulped down a lump in my throat at the sight of her. She smiled a dazzling smile, and Sam gave a little moan and rose right off the floor.

He would have launched himself at her like a missile if I hadn't grabbed his belt and yanked him down into the nearest chair. Wishing there were safety harnesses on the seats, I sat down next to Sam, keeping the full length of the polished imitation wood table between us and the Blonde.

"I think you know why I'm here," she said. Her voice was music.

Sam nodded dumbly, his jaw hanging open. I thought I saw a bit of saliva bubbling at the corner of his mouth.

"Why do you want to leave us, Sam? Don't you *like* us anymore?"

It took three tries before Sam could make his voice work. "It's . . . not that. I . . . I . . . I want to go into business for myself."

"But your employment contract has almost two full years more to run."

"I can't wait two years," he said, in a tiny voice. "This opportunity won't keep. . . ."

"Sam, you're a very valued employee of Global Technologies, Incorporated. We want you to stay with us. *I* want you stay with us."

"I . . . can't."

"But you signed a contract with us, Sam. You gave us your word."

I stuck in my dime's worth. "The contract doesn't prohibit Sam from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quitting. He can leave whenever he wants to."

"But he'll lose all his pension benefits and health care provisions."

"He knows that."

She turned those heartbreakingly blue eyes on Sam again. "It will be a big disappointment to us if you leave, Sam. It will be a *personal* disappointment to me."

To his credit, Sam found the strength within himself to hold his ground. "I'm awfully sorry . . . but I've worked very hard to create this opportunity and I can't let it slip past me now."

She nodded once, as if she understood. Then she asked, "This opportunity you're speaking about: does it have anything to do with the prospect of opening a tourist hotel on Space Station Alpha?"

"That's right. Not just a hotel, a complete tourist facility. Sports complex, entertainment center, zero-gravity honeymoon suites. . . ." He stopped abruptly and his face turned red. Sam *blushed!* He actually blushed.

Miss Beryllium smiled her dazzling smile at him. "But Sam, that idea is the proprietary property of Global Technologies. Global owns the idea, not you."

For a moment the little conference room was absolutely silent. I could hear nothing except the faint background hum of the air-circulation fans. Sam seemed to have stopped breathing.

Then he squawked, "WHAT?"

With a sad little shake of her gorgeous head, the Blonde replied, "Sam, you developed that idea while an employee of Global Technologies. We own it."

"But you turned it down!"

"That makes no difference, Sam. Read your employment contract. It's ours."

"But I made all the contacts. I raised the funding. I worked everything out—on my own time, goddamn it! *On my own time!"*

She shook her head again. "No, Sam. You did it while you were a Global employee. It's not your possession. It belongs to us."

Sam leaped up from his chair and bounded to the ceiling. This time he was ready to make war, not love. "You can't do this to me!"

The Blonde looked completely unruffled by his display. She sat there patiently, a slightly disappointed little frown on her face, while I calmed Sam down and got him back into his chair.

"Sam, dear, I know how you must feel," she said. "I don't want us to be enemies. We'd be happy to have you take part in the tourist hotel program—as a Global employee. There could even be a raise in it for you."

"It's mine, dammit!" Sam screeched. "You can't steal it from me! It's mine!"

She shrugged. "Well, I suppose our lawyers will have to settle it with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your lawyers. In the meantime, I suppose there's nothing for us to do but accept your resignation. With reluctance. With my personal and very sad reluctance."

That much I saw and heard with my own eyes and ears. I had to drag Sam out of the conference room and take him back to his own quarters. She had him whipsawed, telling him that he couldn't claim possession of his own idea, and at the same time practically begging him to stay on with Global and run the tourist project for them.

What happened next depends on whom you ask. There're as many different versions of the story as there are people who tell it. As near as I can piece it all together, though, it went this way:

The Beryllium Blonde had figured that Sam's financial partners would go along with Global Technologies, once they realized that Global had muscled Sam out of the tourist business. But she probably wasn't as sure of everything as she tried to make Sam think. After all, these backers had made their deal with the little guy; maybe they wouldn't want to do business with a big multinational corporation. Worse still, she didn't know exactly what kind of deal Sam had cut with his backers; if Sam had a legally binding contract with them that named him as their partner, they might scrap the whole project when they learned that Global had cut Sam out.

So she showed up at Sam's door that night. He told me that she was still wearing the same jumpsuit, with nothing underneath it except her own luscious body. She brought a bottle of incredibly rare and expensive wine with her. "To show there're no hard feelings."

The Blonde's game was to keep Sam with Global and get him to go through with the tourist hotel idea. Apparently, once Global's management got word that Sam had actually closed a deal for building a tourist facility on Alpha, they figured they might as well go into the tourist business for themselves. Alpha was still underutilized; a tourist facility suddenly made sense to those jerk-offs.

So instead of shuttling back to Phoenix, as we had thought she would, the Blonde knocked on Sam's door that night. The next morning I saw him floating along the Shack's central corridor. He looked kind of dazed.

"She's staying here for a few more days," Sam mumbled. It was like he was talking to himself instead of to me.

But there was a happy little grin on his face.

Everybody in the Shack started to make bets on how long Sam could hold out. The best odds had him capitulating in three nights. Jokes about Delilah and haircuts became uproariously funny to everybody—except me. My future was tied up with Sam's; if the tourist hotel project collapsed,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it wouldn't be long before I was shipped back Earthside, I knew.

After three days, there were dark circles under Sam's eyes. He looked weary. The grin was gone.

After a week had gone by, I found Sam snoring in the Blue Grotto. As gently as I could, I woke him.

"You getting any food into you?" I asked.

He blinked, gummy-eyed. "Chicken soup. I been taking chicken soup. Had some yesterday . . . I think it was yesterday. . . ."

By the tenth day, more money had changed hands among the bettors than on Wall Street. Sam looked like a case of battle fatigue. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes haunted.

"She's a devil, Omar." he whispered hoarsely. "A devil."

"Then get rid of her, man." I urged.

"He smiled wanly. "And quit show business?"

Two weeks to the day after she arrived, the Blonde packed up and left. Her eyes were blazing anger. I saw her off at the docking port. She looked just as perfectly radiant as she had the day she first arrived at the Shack. But what she was radiating now was rage. *Hell hath no fury.* . . . I thought. But I was happy to see her go.

Sam slept for two days straight. When he managed to get up and around again, he was only a shell of his old self. He had lost ten pounds. His eyes were sunken into his skull. His hands shook. His chin was stubbled. He looked as if he had been through hell and back. But his crooked little grin had returned.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"She gave up."

"You mean she's going to let you go?"

He gave a deep, soulful, utterly weary sigh. "I guess she figured she couldn't change my mind and she couldn't kill me—at least not with the method she was using." His grin stretched a little wider.

"We all thought she had you wrapped around her . . . eh, her little finger," I said.

"So did she."

"You outsmarted her!"

"I outlasted her," Sam said, his voice low and suddenly sorrowful. "You know, at one point there, she almost had me convinced that she had fallen in love with me."

"In love with you?"

He shook his head slowly, like a man who had crawled across miles of burning sand toward an oasis that turned out to be a mirage.

"You had me worried, man."

"Why?" His eyes were really bleary.

"Well . . . she's a powerful hunk of woman. Like you said, they sent her up because you're susceptible."

"Yeah. But once she tried to steal my idea from me, I stopped being susceptible anymore. I kept telling myself, 'She's not a gorgeous hot-blooded sexpot of a woman; she's a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

company stooge, a bureaucrat with boobs, an android they sent here to nail you.' "

"And it worked," I said.

"By a millimeter. Less. She damned near beat me. She damned near did. She should have never mentioned marriage. That woke me up."

What had happened, while Sam was fighting the Battle of the Bunk, was that when Sam's partners realized that Global was interested in the tourist facility, they become absolutely convinced that they had a gold mine and backed Sam to the hilt. *Their* lawyers challenged Global's lawyers, and once the paper-shufflers in Phoenix saw that, they realized that Miss Beryllium's mission at the Shack was doomed to fail. The Blonde left in a huff when Phoenix ordered her to return. Apparently, either she was enjoying her work or she thought that she had Sam weakening.

"Now lemme get another week's worth of sleep, will you?" Sam asked me. "And, oh yeah, find me about a ton of vitamin E."

So Sam became the manager and part owner of the human race's first extraterrestrial tourist facility. I was his partner and, the way he worked things out, a major shareholder in the project. Global got some rent money out of it. Actually, so many people enjoyed their vacations aboard the Big Wheel so much that a market eventually opened up for low gravity retirement homes. Sam beat Global on that, too. But that's another story.

Malone was hanging weightlessly near the curving transparent dome of his chamber, staring out at the distant Moon and the cold, unblinking stars.

The reporter had almost forgotten her fear of weightlessness. The black man's story seemed finished; she blinked and adjusted her attention to here and now. Drifting slightly closer to him, she turned the recorder off with an audible click, then thought better of it and clicked it on again.

"So that's how this facility came into being," she said.

Malone nodded, turning in midair to face her. "Yep. Sam got it built, got it started, and then lost interest in it. He had other things on his mind. He went into the advertising business, you know. . . ."

"Oh, yes, everybody knows about that," she replied. "But what happened to the woman, the Beryllium Blonde? And why didn't Sam ever return to Earth again?"

"Two parts of the same answer," Malone said. "Miss Beryllium thought she was playing Sam for a fish, using his Casanova complex to literally screw him out of the hotel deal. Once she realized that *he* was playing *her*, fighting a delaying action until his partners got their lawyers into action, she got damned mad. Power-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fully mad. By the time it finally became clear back at Phoenix that Sam was going to beat them, she took her revenge on Sam."

"What do you mean?"

"Sam wasn't the only one who could riffle through old safety regulations and use them for this own benefit. She found a few early NASA regs, then got some bureaucrats in Washington—from the Office of Safety and Health, I think—to rewrite them so that anybody who'd been living in zero gee for a year or more had to undergo six months' worth of retraining and exercise before he could return to Earth."

"Six months? That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Malone smiled without humor. "That regulation is still on the books, lady. Nobody pays any attention to it anymore, but it's still there."

"She did that to spite Sam?"

"And she made sure Global put all its weight behind enforcing it. Made people think twice before signing an employment contract for working up here. Stuck Sam, but good. He wasn't going to spend any six months retraining! He just never bothered going back to Earth again."

"Did he want to go back?"

"Sure he did. He wasn't like me. He *liked* it back there. There were billions of women on Earth! He wanted to return, but he just couldn't take six months out of his life for it."

"That must have hurt him."

"Yeah, I guess. Hard to tell with Sam. He didn't like to bleed where people could watch."

"And you never went back to Earth," the reporter said.

"No," Malone said. "Thanks to Sam, I stayed up here. He made me manager of the hotel, and once Sam bought the rest of this Big Wheel from Global, I became the manager of the entire Alpha station."

"And you've never had the slightest yearning to see Earth again?"

Malone gazed at her solemnly for long moments before answering. "Sure I get the itch. But when I do, I go down to the one-gee section of the Wheel here. I sit in a wheelchair and try to get around with these crippled legs of mine. The itch goes away then."

"But they have prosthetic legs that you can't tell from the real thing," she said. "Lots of paraplegics . . ."

"Maybe *you* can't tell them from the real thing, but I guarantee you that any paraplegic who uses those things can tell." Malone shook his head. "No, once you've spent some time up here in zero gee, you realize that you don't need legs to get around. You can live a good and useful life here, instead of being a cripple back down there."

"I see," the reporter said.

"Yeah. Sure you do."

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them. She turned off the recorder on her belt, for good

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this time. Finally, Malone softened. "Hey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be nasty with you. It's just that . . . thinking about Sam again. He was a great guy, you know. And now he's dead, and everybody thinks he was just a trouble-making bastard."

"I don't, not anymore," she said. "A womanizing son of a bitch, like you said. A male chauvinist of the first order. But after listening to you tell it, even at that he doesn't sound so terrible."

The black man smiled at her. "Look at the time! No wonder I'm hungry! Can I take you down to the dining room for some supper?"

"The dining room in the full-gravity area?"

"Yes, of course."

"Won't you be uncomfortable there? Isn't there a dining area in the low-gravity section?"

"Sure, but won't you be uncomfortable there?"

She laughed. "I think I can handle it."

"Really?"

"Certainly. And maybe you can tell me how Sam got himself into the advertising business."

"All right. I'll do that."

As she turned, she caught sight of the immense beauty of Earth sliding past the observation dome; the Indian Ocean a breathtaking swirl of deep blues and greens, the subcontinent of India decked with purest white clouds.

"But . . ." She looked at Malone, then asked in a whisper, "Don't you miss being home, being on Earth? Don't you feel isolated here, away from . . ."

His booming laughter shocked her. "Isolated? Up here?" Malone pitched himself forward into a weightless somersault, then pirouetted in midair. He pointed toward the ponderous bulk of the planet and said, *"They're* the one's who're isolated. Up here, I'm free!"

He offered her his arm, and they floated together toward the gleaming metal hatch, their feet a good eight inches above the chamber's floor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Installment 3: *In Which We Scuffle Through the Embers*

If tomorrow's early edition of *The New York Times* bore the headline STEPHEN KING NAMED AS DE LOREAN DRUG CONNECTION, it would not by one increment lessen the number of Stephen King books sold this week. Goose the total, more likely.

If Tom Brokaw's lead on the NBC news tonight is, "The King of Chiller Writers, Stephen King, was found late this afternoon in the show window of Saks Fifth Avenue, biting the heads off parochial school children and pouring hot lead down their necks," it would not for an instant slow the rush of film producers to put under option his every published word. Hasten the pace, more likely.

If your cousin Roger from Los Angeles, who works for a food catering service that supplies meals to film companies working on location, called to pass along the latest hot bit of in-group showbiz gossip, and he confided, "You know Steve King, that weirdo who writes the scary novels? Well, get this: he worked with Errol Flynn as a secret agent for the Nazis during World War II!" it would not drop the latest King tome one notch on the *Publishers Weekly* bestseller listings. Pop it to the top of the chart, more likely.

Stephen King is a phenomenon *sui generis*. I've been told he is fast approaching (if he hasn't already reached it) the point of being the best-selling American author of all time. In a recent survey taken by some outfit or other — and I've looked long and hard for the item but can't find it so you'll have to trust me on this — it was estimated that two out of every five people observed reading a paperback in air terminals or bus stations or suchlike agorae were snout-deep in a King foma.

There has never been anything like King in the genre of the fantastic. Whether you call what he writes "horror stories" or "dark fantasy" or "imaginative thrillers," Stephen King is

Copyright © 1984 by The Kilimanjaro Corporation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the undisputed, hands-down, nonpareil, free-form champ, three falls out of three.

This is a Good Thing.

Not only because King is a better writer than the usual gag of bestseller epigones who gorge the highest reaches of the lists — the Judith Krantzes, Sidney Sheldons, Erich Segals and V.C. Andrewses of this functionally illiterate world — or because he is, within the parameters of his incurably puckish nature, a "serious" writer, or because he is truly and in the face of a monumental success that would warp the rest of us, a good guy. It is because he is as honest a popular writer as we've been privileged to experience in many a year. He writes a good stick. He never cheats the buyer of a King book. You may or may not feel he brought off a particular job when you get to page last, but you *never* feel you've been had. He does the one job no writer may ignore at peril of tar and feathers, he *delivers*.

Sometimes what he delivers is as good as a writer can get in his chosen milieu, as in *Carrie* and *The Shining* and *The Dead Zone* and *The Dark Tower*. Sometimes he's just okay, as in *Cujo* or *Christine*. And once in a while, as in the *Night Shift* and *Different Seasons* collections, he sings way above his range. (And those of us who have been privileged to read the first couple of sections of "The Plant," King's work-in-progress privately printed as annual holiday greeting card, perceive a talent of uncommon dimensions.)

So why is it that films made from Stephen King's stories turn out, for the most part, to be movies that look as if they'd been chiseled out of Silly Putty by escapees from the Home For the Terminally Inept?

This question, surely one of the burning topics of our troubled cosmos, presents itself anew upon viewing FIRESTARTER (Universal), Dino De Laurentiis's latest credential in his struggle to prove to the world that he has all the artistic sensitivity of a piano bench. Based on Steve King's 1980 novel, and a good solid novel it was, this motion picture is (forgive me) a burnt-out case. We're talking scorched earth. Smokey the Bear would need a sedative. Jesus wept. You get the idea.

The plotline is a minor key-change on the basic fantasy concept King used in *Carrie*. Young female with esper abilities as a pyrotic. (Because the people who make these films think human speech is not our natural tongue, they always gussie up simple locutions so their prolixity will sound "scientific." Pyrotic was not good enough for the beanbags who made this film, so they keep referring to the firstarter as "a possessor of pyrokinetic abilities." In the Kingdom of the Beanbags a honeydipper is a "Defecatory Residue Repository Removal Supervisor for On-Site Effectation.")

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The conflict is created by the merciless hunt for the firestarter — eight-year-old Charlene "Charlie" McGee, played by Drew Barrymore of *E.T.* fame — that is carried out by a wholly improbable government agency alternately known as the Department of Scientific Intelligence and "The Shop." Charlie and her daddy, who also has esper abilities, though his seem to shift and alter as the plot demands, are on the run. The Shop has killed Charlie's mommy, for no particularly clear reason, and they want Charlie for their own nefarious purposes, none of which are logically codified; but we can tell from how oily these three-piece-suiters are, that Jack Armstrong would never approve of their program. Charlie and her daddy run, The Shop gnashes its teeth and finally sends George C. Scott as a comic-book hit man after them; and they capture the pair; and they run some special effects tests; and Charlie gets loose; and a lot of people go up in flames; and daddy and the hit man and the head of The Shop all get smoked; and Charlie hitchhikes back to the kindly rustic couple who thought it was cute when she looked at the butter and made it melt.

The screenplay by Stanley Mann, who did not disgrace himself with screen adaptations of *The Collector* and *Eye of the Needle,* here practices a craft that can best be described as creative typing. Or, more in keeping with technology, what he has wrought now explains to me the previously nonsensical phrase "word processing." As practiced by Mr. Mann, this is the processing of words in the Cuisinart School of Homogeneity.

The direction is lugubrious. As windy and psychotic as Mann's scenario may be, it is rendered even more tenebrous by the ponderous, lumbering, pachydermal artlessness of one Mark L. Lester (*not* the kid-grown-up of *Oliver!*). Mr. Lester's fame, the *curriculum vita,* that secured for him this directional sinecure, rests on a quagmire base of *Truck Stop Women, Bobbie Jo and the Outlaw* (starring Lynda Carter and Marjoe Gortner, the most fun couple to come along since Tracy and Hepburn, Gable and Lombard, Cheech and Chong), *Stunts* and the awesome *Roller Boogie.* The breath do catch, don't it!

Like the worst of the television hacks, who tell you everything three times — Look, she's going to open the coffin! / She's opening the coffin now! / Good lord, she opened the coffin! — Lester and Mann reflect their master's contempt for the intelligence of filmgoers by endless sophomoric explanations of things we know, not the least being a tedious rundown on what esp is supposed to be.

The acting is shameful. From the cynical use of "name stars" in cameo roles that they might as well have phoned in, to the weary posturing of the leads, this is a drama coach's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nightmare. Louise Fletcher sleepwalks through her scenes like something Papa Doc might have resurrected from a Haitian graveyard; Martin Sheen, whose thinnest performances in the past have been marvels of intelligence and passion, has all the range of a Barry Manilow ballad; David Keith with his constantly bleeding nose is merely ridiculous; and Drew Barrymore, in just two years, has become a puffy, petulant, self-conscious "actor," devoid of the ingenuousness that so endeared her in *E.T.*

And what in the world has happened to George C. Scott's previously flawless intuition about which scripts to do? It was bad enough that he consented to appear as the lead in Paul Schrader's loathsome *Hardcore;* but for him willingly to assay the role of John Rainbird, the ponytailed Amerind government assassin, and to perform the part of what must surely be the most detestable character since Joyboy's mother in *The Loved One,* Divine in *Pink Flamingos* or Jabba the Hut with a verve that borders on teeth-gnashing, is beyond comprehension. It has been a while since I read the novel, but it is not my recollection that the parallel role in the text possessed the McMartin Pre-School child molester mien Scott presents. It is a jangling, counter-productive, unsavory element that is, hideously, difficult to sweep from memory. That it is in some squeamish-making way memorable, is not to Scott's credit. It is the corruption of his talent.

Dino De Laurentiis is the Irwin Allen of his generation, coarse, lacking subtlety, making films of vulgar pretentiousness that personify the most venal attitudes of the industry. He ballyhoos the fact that he had won two Oscars, but hardly anyone realizes they were for Fellini's *La Strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* in 1954 and 1957 —and let's not fool ourselves, even if the publicity flaks do: those are *Fellini* films, not De Laurentiis films — long before he became the cottage industry responsible for *Death Wish,* the remakes of *King Kong* and *The Hurricane,* the travesty known as *Flash Gordon, Amityville II* and *Amityville 3-D, Conan the Barbarian* and the embarrassing *King of the Gypsies.*

But Dino De Laurentiis is precisely the sort of intellect most strongly drawn to the works of Stephen King. He is not a lone blade of grass in the desert. He is merely the most visible growth on the King horizon. Stephen King has had nine films made from his words, and there is a formulaic reason why all but one or two of those films have been dross.

Next time I'll try to codify that reason.

Until then, and more about these films later, go see *Repo Man* (if you can find it) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.* Avoid with all

(to page 135)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marion Zimmer Bradley is the popular author of the Darkover novels and of a bestselling Arthurian novel, THE MISTS OF AVALON. She makes a welcome return to these pages with a fine tale about a magician and a reluctant quest.

Somebody Else's Magic

BY
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

In a place like the Thieves' Quarter of Old Gandrin, there is no survival skill more important than the ability to mind your own business. Come robbery, rape, arson, blood feud, or the strange doings of wizards, a carefully cultivated deaf ear for other people's problems — not to mention a blind eye, or better, two, for anything that is not your affair — is the best way, maybe the only way, to keep out of trouble.

It is no accident that everywhere in Old Gandrin, and everywhere else under the Twin Suns, they speak of the blinded eye of Keth-Ketha. A god knows better than to watch the doings of his creatures too carefully.

Lythande, the mercenary-magician, knew this perfectly well. When the first scream rang down the quarter, despite an involuntary shoulder twitch, Lythande knew that the proper thing was to look straight ahead and keep right on walking in the same direction. It was one of the reasons why Lythande had survived this long; through cultivating superb skill at own-business-minding in a place where there were a variety of strange businesses to be minded.

Yet there was a certain note to the screams—

Ordinary robbery or even rape might not have penetrated that carefully cultivated shell of blindness, deafness, looking straight into the thick of it. Lythande's hand gripped almost without thought at the hilt of the right-hand knife, the black-handled one that hung from the red girdle knotted over the mage-robe, flipped it out, and ran straight into trouble.

The woman was lying on the ground now, and there had been at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

least a dozen of them, long odds even for the Thieves Quarter. Somehow, before they had gotten her down, she had managed to kill at least four of them, but there were others, standing around and cheering the survivors on. The Blue Star between Lythande's brows, the mark of a Pilgrim Adept, had begun to glow and flicker with blue lightnings, in time with the in-and-out flicker of the blade. Two, then three went down before they knew what had hit them, and a fourth was spitted in the middle of his foul work, ejaculating and dying with a single cry. Two more fell, spouting blood, one from a headless neck, the other falling sidewise, unbalanced by an arm lopped away at the shoulder, bled out before he hit the ground. The rest took to their heels, shrieking. Lythande wiped the blade on the cloak of one of the dead men and bent over the dying woman.

She was small and frail to have done so much damage to her assailants; and they had made her pay for it. She wore the leather garments of a swordsman; they had been ripped off her, and she was bleeding everywhere, but she was not defeated — even now she made a feeble gesture toward her sword and snarled, her bitten lips drawn back over bared teeth, "Wait ten minutes, animal, and I will be beyond caring; then you may take your pleasure from my corpse and be damned to you!"

A swift look round showed Lythande that nothing human was alive within hearing. It was nowhere within the bounds of possibility that this woman could live and betray her. Lythande knelt, crushing the woman's head gently against her breast.

"Hush, hush, my sister. I will not harm you."

The woman looked up at her in wonder, and a smile spread over the dying face. She whispered, "I thought I had betrayed my last trust — I was sworn to die first; but there were too many for me. The Goddess does not forgive — those who submit—"

She was slipping away. Lythande whispered, "Be at peace, child. The Goddess does not condemn...." And thought: *I would not give a fart in sulphurous hell for a goddess who would.*

"My sword—" the woman groped; already she found it hard to see. Lythande put the hilt into her fingers.

"My sword — dishonored—" she whispered. "I am Larith. The sword must go — back to her shrine. Take it. Swear—"

Larithae! Lythande knew of the shrine of that hidden goddess and of the vow her women made. She could now understand, though never excuse, the thugs who had attacked and killed the woman. Larithae were fair game everywhere from the Southern Waste to Falthot in the Ice Hills. The shrine of the Goddess as Larith lay at the end of the longest and most dangerous road in the Forbidden Country,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and it was a road Lythande had no reason nor wish to tread. A road, moreover, that by her own oath she was forbidden, for she might never reveal herself as a woman, at the cost of the Power that had set the Blue Star between her brows. And only women sought, or could come to, the shrine of Larith.

Firmly, denying, Lythande shook her head.

"My poor girl, I cannot; I am sworn elsewhere, and serve not your Goddess. Let her sword remain honorably in your hand. No," she repeated, putting away the woman's pleading hand, "I cannot, Sister. Let me bind up your wounds, and you shall take that road yourself another day."

She knew the woman was dying; but it would give her something, Lythande thought, to occupy her thoughts in death. And if, in secret and in her own heart, she cursed the impetus that had prompted her to ignore that old survival law of minding her own business, no hint of it came into the hard but compassionate face she bent on the dying swordswoman.

The Laritha was silent, smiling faintly beneath Lythande's gentle ministrations; she let Lythande straighten her twisted limbs, try to stanch the blood that now had slowed to a trickle. But already her eyes were dulling and glazing. She caught at Lythande's fingers and whispered, in a voice so thready that only by Lythande's skill at magic could the words be distinguished, "Take the sword, Sister. Larith witness I give it to you freely without oath...."

With a mental shrug, Lythande whispered, "So be it, without oath ... bear witness for me in that dark country, Sister, and hold me free of it."

Pain flitted over the dulled eyes for the last time.

"Go free — if you can—" the woman whispered, and with her last movement thrust the hilt of the *larith* sword into Lythande's palm. Lythande, startled, by pure reflex closed her hand on the hilt, then abruptly realized what she was doing — rumor had many tales of larith magic, and Lythande wanted none of their swords! She let it go and tried to push it back into the woman's hand. But the fingers had locked in death and would not receive it.

Lythande sighed and laid the woman gently down. Now what was to be done? She had made it clear that she would not take the sword; one of the few things that was really known about the Larithae was that their shrine was a shrine of women sword-priestesses, and that no man might touch their magic, on pain of penalties too dreadful to be imagined. Lythande, Pilgrim Adept, who had paid more highly for the Blue Star than any other Adept in the history of the Order, dared not be found anywhere in the light of Keth or her sister Reth with a sword of Larith in her possession. For the very life of Lythande's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

magic depended on this: that she never be known as a woman.

The doom had been just, of course. The shrine of the Blue Star had been forbidden to women for more centuries than can be counted upon the fingers of both hands. In all the history of the Pilgrim Adepts, no woman before Lythande had penetrated their secrets in disguise; and when at last she was exposed and discovered, she was so far into the secrets of the Order that she was covered by the dreadful oath that permits one Pilgrim Adept to slay another — for all are sworn to fight, on the Last Day of All, for Law against Chaos. They could not kill her; and since already she bore all the secrets of their Order, she could not be bidden to depart.

But the doom laid on her had been what she had, unknowing, chosen when she came into the Temple of the Blue Star under concealment.

"As you have chosen to conceal your womanhood, so shall you forever conceal it," thus had fallen the doom, "for on that secret shall hang your power; on the day that any other Adept of the Blue Star shall proclaim forth your true sex, on that day is your power fallen, and ended with it the sanctity that protects you against vengeance upon one who stole our secrets. Be, then, what you have chosen to be, and be so throughout the eternity until the Last Battle of Law against Chaos."

And so, fenced about with all the other vows of a Pilgrim Adept, Lythande bore that doom of eternal concealment. Never might she reveal herself to any man; nor to any woman save one she could trust with power and life. Only three times had she dared confide in any, and of those three, two were dead. One had died by torture when a rival Adept of the Blue Star had sought to wring Lythande's secret from her; had died still faithful. And the other had died in her arms, minutes ago. Lythande smothered a curse; her weak admission to a dying woman might have saddled her with a curse, even though she had sworn nothing. If she were seen with a *larith* sword, she might as well proclaim her true sex aloud from the High Temple steps at midday in Old Gandrin!

Well, she would not be seen with it. The sword should lie in the grave of the Laritha who had honorably defended it.

Lythande stood up, drawing down the hood of the mage-robe over her face so that the Blue Star was in shadow. Nothing about her — tall, lean, angular — betrayed that she was other than any Pilgrim Adept; her smooth, hairless face might have been the hairlessness of a freak or an effeminate had there been any to question it — which there was not — and the pale hair, square-cut after an ancient fashion, the narrow hawk-features, were strong and sexless, the jawline too hard for most women. Never, for an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

instant, by action, word, mannerism, or inattention, had she ever betrayed that she was other than magician, mercenary. Under the mage-robe was the ordinary dress of a north-country-man — leather breeches; high, laceless boots; sleeveless leather jerkin — and the laced and ruffled undertunic of a dandy. The ringless hands were calloused and square, ready to either of the swords that were girded at the narrow waist; the right-hand blade for material enemies, the left-hand blade against things of magic.

Lythande picked up the *larith* blade and held it distastefully at arm's length. Somehow she must see to having the woman buried, and the heap of corpses they had made between them. By fantastic luck, no one had entered the street till now, but a drunken snatch of song raised raucous echoes between the old buildings, and a drunken man reeled down the street, with two or three companions to hold him upright, and seeing Lythande standing over the heap of bodies, got the obvious impression.

"Murder!" he howled. "Here's murder and death! Ho, the watch, the guards — help, murder!"

"Stop howling," Lythande said, "the victim is dead, and all the rest of her assailants fled."

The man came to stare drunkenly down at the body.

"Pretty one, too," said the first man. "Did you get your turn before she died?"

"She was too far gone," Lythande said truthfully. "But she is a country-woman of mine, and I promised her I would see her decently buried." A hand went into the mage-robe and came out with a glint of gold. "Where do I arrange for it?"

"I hear the watchmen," said one man, less drunk than his companions, and Lythande, too, could hear the ringing of boots on stone, the clash of pikes. "For that kind of gold, you could have half the city buried, and if there weren't enough corpses, I'd make you a few more myself."

Lythande flung the drunk some coins. "Get her buried, then, and that carrion with her."

"I'll see to it," said the least drunk, "and not even toss you a coin for that fine sword of hers; you can take it to her kinfolk."

Lythande stared at the sword in her hand. She would have sworn she had laid it properly across the dead woman's breast. Well, it had been a confusing half hour. She bent and laid it on the lifeless breast. "Touch it not; it is a *larith* sword; I dare not think what the Larithae would do to you, should they find you with *that* in your hand."

The drunken men shrank back. "May I defile virgin goats if I touch it," said one of them, with a superstitious gesture. "But do you not fear the curse?"

And now she was confused enough that she had picked up the *larith* blade

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again. This time she put it carefully down across the Laritha's body and spoke the words of an unbinding-spell in case the dying woman's gesture had somehow sought to bind that sword to her. Then she moved into the shadows of the street in that noiseless and unseen way that often caused people to swear, truthfully, that they had seen Lythande appearing or disappearing into thin air. She looked on from the shadows until the watchmen had come, cursing, and dragged away the bodies for burial. In this city, they knew little of the Goddess Larith and her worship, and Lythande thought, conscience-stricken, that she should have seen to it that the woman and her ravishers were not buried in the same grave. Well, and what if they were? They were all dead, and might await the Last Battle against Chaos together; they could have no further care for what befell their corpses, or if they did, they could tell it to whatever judges awaited them on the far side of death's gate.

This story is not concerned with the business that had brought Lythande to Old Gandrin, but when it was completed the next day, and the mercenary-magician emerged from a certain house in the Merchants' Quarter, stowing more coins into the convenient folds of the mage-robe, and ruefully remembering the depleted stocks of magical herbs and stones in the pouches and pockets stowed in odd places about that mage-robe, Lythande, with a most unpleasant start, found her fingers entangled with a strange object of metal tied about her waist. It was the *larith* sword; and it was, moreover, tied there with a strange knot that gave her fingers some little trouble to untie, and was certainly not her own work!

"Chaos and hellfire!" swore Lythande. "There is more to larith magic than I ever thought!"

That damnable impulse that had prompted her to meddle in somebody else's business had now, it seemed, saddled her with someone else's magic. Furthermore, her unbinding-spell had not worked. Now she must make strong magic that would not fail; and first she must find herself a safe place to do it.

In Old Gandrin she had no safe-house established, and the business that had brought her here, though important and well paid, was not of the kind that makes many friends or incurs much gratitude. She had been gifted past what she had asked for her services; but should Lythande present herself at that same door where she had worked spells to thrust out ghosts and haunts, she did not deceive herself that she would receive much welcome. What, then, to do? A Pilgrim Adept did not make magic in the street like a wandering juggler!

A common tavern? Some shelter, indeed, she must find before the burning eye of Reth sank below the horizon; she was carrying much gold, and had no

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wish to defend it in the night-streets of the Thieves' Quarter. She must also replenish her stocks of magical herbs, and also find a place to rest, and eat, and drink, before she set off northward to the shrine of the Goddess as Larith....

Lythande cursed aloud, so angrily that a passerby in the street turned and stared in protest. Northward to Larith? Was that forever-be-damned sorcerous sword beginning to work on her very thoughts? This was strong magic; but she would not go to Larith, no, by the Final Battle, she would *not* go northward, but south, and nowhere near that accursed shrine of the Larithae! *Not while there is magic left in the arsenal of a Pilgrim Adept, I will not!*

In the market, moving noiselessly in the concealment of the mage-robe, she found a stall where magical herbs were for sale, and bartered briefly for them; briefly, because the law of magic states that whatever is wanted for the making of magic must be bought without haggling, gold being no more than dross at the service of magical arts. Yet, Lythande mused darkly, that knowledge had evidently become common among herb-sellers and spell-candlers of the Gandrin market, and as a result their prices had gone from the merely outrageous to the unthinkable. Lythande remonstrated briefly with a woman at one of these stalls.

"Come, come, four Thirds for a handful of darkleaf?"

"And how am I to know that when ye give me gold, ye havena' spelled it from copper or worse?" demanded the herb-seller. "Last moon I sold one of your Order a full quartern of dreamroot and bloodleaf, full cured by a fire o' hazel and spellroot, and that defiler of virgin goats paid me wi' two rounds of gold — he said. But when the moon changed, I looked at 'em, and it was no more than a handful of barley stuck together wi' spellroot and smelling worse than the devil's farts! I take that risk into account when I set my prices, magician!"

"Such folk bring disrepute on the name of the magician," Lythande agreed gravely, but secretly wished she knew that spell. There were dishonest innkeepers who would be better paid in barley grains; in fact, the grain would be worth more than their services! The spell-candler was looking at Lythande as if she had more to say, and Lythande raised inquiring eyebrows.

"I'd give you the stuff for half if you'd show me a spell to tell true gold from false, magician."

Lythande looked round, and on a nearby stall saw the crystals she wanted. She picked up one of them.

"The crystal called *blue zeth* is a touchstone of magic," Lythande said. "False gold will not have a true gold shimmer; and other things spelled to look like gold will show what they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are, but only if you blink thrice and look between the second and third blink. That bracelet on your arm, good woman—"

The woman slid the bracelet down over her plump hand; Lythande took it up and looked through the *blue zeth* crystal.

"As you can clearly see," she said, "this bracelet is—" and to her surprise, concluded — "false gold; pot-metal glided."

The woman squinted, blinked at the bracelet. "Why, that defiler of virgin goats," she howled. "I will kick his arse from here to the river! Him and his tales of his uncle the goldsmith—"

Lythande restrained a smile, though the corners of her lips twitched. "Have I created trouble with husband or lover, O good woman?"

"Only that he'd like to be, I make no doubt," muttered the woman, throwing the cheap bracelet down with contempt.

"Look at something I know to be true gold, then," Lythande said, and picked up one of the coins she had given the woman. "True gold will look like *this*—" And at her wave, the woman bent to look at the golden shimmer of the coin. "What is *not* gold will take on the blue color of the *zeth* crystal, or" — she took up a copper, gestured, and the copper shone with a deceptive gold luster; she thrust it under the crystal — "if you blink three times and look between the second and third blink, you can tell what it is really made of."

Delighted, the stallkeeper bought a handful of *blue zeth* crystals at the neighboring stall. "Take the herbs, then, gift for gift," she said, then asked suspiciously, "What else will you ask me for this spell? For it is truly priceless—"

"Priceless, indeed," Lythande agreed. "I ask only that you tell the spell to three other persons, and exact a promise that each person to whom it is told tell three others. Dishonest magicians bring evil repute — and then it is hard for an honest one to make a living."

And, of course, what nine market women knew would soon be known everywhere in the city. The sellers of *blue zeth* would profit, but not beyond their merits.

"Yet the magicians of the Blue Star are honest, so far as I've had dealings with 'em," the woman said, putting away the *blue zeth* crystals into a capacious and not-very-clean pocket. "I got decent gold from the one who bought spellroot from me last New Moon."

Lythande froze and went very still, but the Blue Star on the browless forehead began to sparkle slightly and glow. "Know you his name? I knew not that a brother of my Order had been within Old Gandrin this season."

It meant nothing, of course. But, like all Pilgrim Adepts, Lythande was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a solitary, and would have preferred that what she did in Old Gandrin should not be spied on by another. And it lent urgency to her errand; above all, she must not be seen with the *larith* sword, lest the secret of her sex become known; it was not well known within Gandrin — for the Larithae seldom came so far south — but in the North it was known that only a woman might touch, handle, or wield a *larith* sword.

"Upon reflection," she said, "I have done you, as you say, a priceless service; do you one for me in return."

The woman hesitated for a moment, and Lythande for one did not blame her. It is not, as a general rule, wise to entangle oneself in the private affairs of wizards, and certainly not when that wizards glows with lightning flash of the Blue Star. The woman glowered at the false gold bracelet and muttered, "What is your need?"

"Direct me to a safe lodging place this night — one where I may make magic, and see to it that I do so unobserved."

The woman said at last, grudgingly, "I am no tavern, and have no public-room and no great-kitchens for roasting meat. Yet now and again I let out my upper chamber, if the tenant is sober and respectable. And my son — he's nineteen and like a bull about the shoulders — he'll stand below wi' a cudgel and keep away anyone who would spy. I'll gi' you that room for a half o' gold."

A half? That was more outrageous than the price she had set on her baggin of spellroot. But now, of all times, Lythande dared not haggle.

"Done, but I must have a decent meal served me in privacy."

The woman considered adding to the charge, but under the glare of the Blue Star, she said quickly, "I'll send out to the cookshop round the corner and get ye roast fowl and a honey-cake."

Lythande nodded, thinking of the sword of Larith tied under the mage-robe. In privacy, then, she could work her best unbinding-spell, then bury the sword by the riverbank and hasten southward.

"I shall be here at sunset," she said.

As the crimson face of Reth faded below the horizon, Lythande locked herself within the upper chamber. She was fiercely hungry and thirsty — among the dozen or more vows that fenced about the power of a Pilgrim Adept, it was forbidden to eat or drink within the sight of any man. The prohibition did not apply to women, but, ever conscious of the possibility of disguise like her own, she had fenced it with unending vigilance and discipline; she could not, now, have forced herself to swallow a morsel of food or drink except in the presence of one or two of her trusted confidantes, and only one of these

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew Lythande to be a woman. But that woman was far away, in a city beyond the world's end, and Lythande had no trusted associate nearer than that.

She had managed, hours ago, a sip of water at a public fountain in a deserted square. She had eaten nothing for several days save for a few bites of dried fruit, taken under cover of darkness, from a small store she kept in pockets of the mage-robe. The rare luxury of a hot meal in assured privacy was almost enough to break her control, but before touching anything, she checked the locks and searched the walls for unseen spy-holes where she might be overlooked; unlikely, she knew, but Lythande's survival all these years had rested on just such unsparing vigilance.

Then she drank from the ewer of water, washed herself carefully, and setting a little water to heat by the good fire in the room, carefully shaved her eyebrows, a pretense she had kept up ever since she began to look too old to pass for a beardless boy. She left the razor and soap carefully by the hearth where they could be seen. She could, if she must, briefly create an illusion of beard, and sometimes smeared her face with dirt to add to it, but it was difficult and demanded close concentration, and she dared not rely on it; so she shaved her eyebrows close, with the thought that a man known to shave his eyebrows would probably have to shave his beard as well.

Hearing steps on the stair, she drew the mage-robe about her, and the herb-seller puffed up the last steps and into the opened door. She set the smoking tray on the table, murmured, "I'll empty that for ye," and took up the bowl of soapy water and the slop jar. "My son's at the stairway wi' his cudgel; none will disturb you here, magician."

Nevertheless, Lythande, alone again, made very sure the bolt was well-drawn and the room still free of spy-eyes or spells; who knew what the herb-seller might have brought with her? Some spell-candlers had pretensions to the arts of sorcery. Moreover, the woman had mentioned that she had seen another Adept of the Blue Star; and Lythande had enemies among them. Suppose the herb-seller were in the pay of Rabben the Half-handed, or Beccolo, or ... Lythande dismissed this unprofitable speculation. The room appeared empty and harmless. The smell of roast fowl and the freshly baked loaf was dizzying in her famished condition, but magic could not be made on a full stomach, so she packed away the smell into a remote corner of her consciousness and drew out the Larith's sword.

It felt warm to the touch, and there was the small tingling that reminded Lythande that powerful magic resided in it.

She cast a pinch of a certain herb

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into the fire and , breathing the powerful scent, focused all her powers into one spell. Under her feet, the floor rocked as the Word of Power died, and there was a faint, faraway rumble as of falling walls and towers — or was it only distant summer thunder?

She passed her hand lightly above the sword, careful not to touch it. She was not really familiar with the magic of the Larithae; as Lythande the Pilgrim Adept, she could not be, and while she still lived as a woman, she had never come closer than to know what every passerby knew. But it seemed to her that whatever magic dwelt in the sword was gone; perhaps not banished, but sleeping.

From her pack she sacrificed one of the spare tunics she carried, and carefully wrapped the sword. The tunic was a good one, heavy white silk from the walled and ancient city of Jumathe, where the silkworms were tended by a special caste of women, blinded in childhood so that their fingers would have more sensitivity when the time came to strip the silk from the cocoons. Their songs were legendary, and Lythande had once gone there, dressed as a woman, a cloak hiding the Blue Star, grateful for the women's blindness so that she could speak in her own voice; she had sung them songs of her own north-country, and heard their songs in return, while they thought her only a wandering minstrel girl. The sighted overseer, however, had been suspicious, and had finally accused her of being a man in disguise — for a man to approach the blind women was a crime punishable by death in a particularly unpleasant fashion — and it had taken all of Lythande's magic to extricate herself. But that is another story.

Lythande wrapped the sword in the tunic. She regretted the necessity of giving it up — she had had it for a long time; she shrank from thinking how many years ago she had sung her songs within the house of the blind silkworm-tenders in Jumathe! But for such magic a real sacrifice was necessary, and she had nothing else to sacrifice that meant the least thing to her; so she wrapped the sword in it, and bound it with the cord she had passed through the herb-smoke, tying it with the magical ninefold knot.

Then she set it aside and sat down to eat up the roast fowl and the freshly baked bread with the sense of a task well done.

When the house was quiet, and the herb-seller's son had put his cudgel away and retired to rest, Lythande slipped down the stairs noiselessly as a shadow. She had to spell the lock so that it would not creak, and a somewhat smaller spell would make any passerby think that the drawn-back bolt, open padlock, and open door were firmly shut and bolted. Silken bundle under her arm, she slipped silently to the riverbank and, working

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by the dim light of the smaller moon, dug a hole and buried the bundle; then, speaking a final spell, strode away without looking back.

Returning to the herb-seller's house, she thought she saw something following in the street, and turned to look. No, it was only a shadow. She slipped in through the open door — which still looked charmed and locked — locked it tight from within, and regained her room with less sound than a mouse in the walls.

The fire had burned to coals. Lythande sat by the fire and took from her pack a small supply of sweet herbs with no magical properties whatever, rolled them into a narrow tube, and sparked it alight. So relaxed was she that she did not even use her fire-ring, but stooped to light the tube from the last coals of the fire. She leaned back, inhaling the fragrant smoke and letting it trickle out slowly from her nostrils. When she had smoked it down to a small stub, she took off her heavy boots, wrapped herself tightly in the mage-robe and then in the herb-seller's blanket, and lay down to sleep.

Before dawn she would arise and vanish as if by magic, leaving the door bolted behind her on the inside — there was no special reason for this, but a magician must preserve some mystery, and if she left by the stairs in the ordinary way, perhaps the innkeeper would be left with the impression that perhaps magicians were not so extraordinary after all, since they ate good dinners and washed and shaved and filled slop jars like any ordinary mortal. So when Lythande had gone, the room would be set to rights without a wrinkle in the bedclothes or an ash in the fireplace, the door still bolted on the inside as if no one had left the room at all.

And besides, it was more amusing that way.

But for now, she would sleep for a few hours in peace, grateful that the clumsiness that had entangled her in somebody else's magic had come to a good end. No whisper disturbed her sleep to the effect that it hadn't really even started yet.

The last of the prowling sleeves had slipped away to their holes and corners, and the red eye of Keth was still blinded by night when Lythande slipped out of Old Gandrin by the southern gate. She took the road south for two reasons: there was always work for mercenary or magician in the prosperous seaport of Gwennane, and also she wished to be certain in her own mind that after her drastic unbinding-spell, nothing called her northward to the Larith shrine.

The least of the moons had waned and set, and it was that black-dark hour when dawn is not even a promise in the sky. The gate was locked and barred, and the sleepy watchman, when Lythande asked quietly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for the gate to be opened, growled that he wouldn't open the gate at that hour for the High Autarch of Gandrin himself, far less for some ne'er-do-well prowling when honest folk and dishonest folk were all sleeping, or ought to be. He remembered afterward that the star between the ridges where Lythande's brows ought to have been had begun to sparkle and flare blue lightning, and he could never explain why he found himself meekly opening the gate and then doing it up again afterward. "Because," he said earnestly, "I never saw that fellow in the mage-robe go *through* the gate, not at all; he turned hisself invisible!" And because Lythande was not all that well known in Old Gandrin, no one ever told him it was merely Lythande's way.

Lythande breathed a sigh of relief when the gate was shut behind her, and began to walk swiftly in the dark, striding long and full and silent. At that pace, the Pilgrim Adept covered several leagues before a faint flush in the sky told where the eye of Keth would stare through the dawn clouds. Reth would follow some hours later. Lythande continued, covering ground at a rate, then was vaguely troubled by something she could not quite identify. Yes, something was wrong....

... It certainly was. Keth was rising, which was as it should be, but Keth was rising on her *right* hand, which was *not* as it should be; she had taken the southward road out of Old Gandrin, yet here she was, striding northward at a fast pace. To the north. Toward the shrine of Larith.

Yet she could not remember turning round for long enough to become confused and take the wrong direction in the darkness. She must have done so somehow. She stopped in mid-stride, whirled about, and put the sun where it should be, on her left, and began pacing steadily south.

But after a time she felt the prickle in her shins and buttocks and the cold-flame glow of the Blue Star between her brows, which told her that magic was being made somewhere about her. And the sun was shining on her right hand, and she was standing directly outside the gates of Old Gandrin.

Lythande said aloud, "No. Damnation and Chaos!" disturbing a little knot of milkwomen who were driving their cows to market. They stared at the tall, sexless figure and whispered, but Lythande cared nothing for their gossip. She started to turn round again and found herself actually walking through the gates of Old Gandrin again.

Through the south gate. Traveling north.

Now this is ridiculous, Lythande thought. I buried the sword myself, locked there with my strongest unbinding spell! Yet her pack bulged strangely; ripping out a gutter obscenity, Lythande unslung the pack and discovered what she had known

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she would discover the moment she felt that strange prickling cramp that told her there was magic in use — somebody else's magic! At the very top of the pack, wedged in awkwardly, was the white silk tunic, draggled with the soil of the riverbank, and thrusting through it — as if, Lythande thought with a shudder, it were trying to get out — was the *larith* sword.

Lythande had not survived this long under the Twin Suns without becoming oblivious to hysteria. The Adepts of the Blue Star held powerful magic; but every mage knew that sooner or later, everyone would encounter magic-stronger yet. Now she felt rage rather than fear. Heartily, Lythande damned the momentary impulse of compassion for a dying woman that led her to reveal herself. Well, done was done. She had the *larith* sword and seemed likely — Lythande thought with a flicker of irony — to have it until she could devise a strong enough magic to get rid of it again.

Was she fit for a really prolonged magical duel? It would attract attention; and somewhere within the walls of Old Gandrin — or so the herb-seller had told her — there was another Adept of the Blue Star. If she began making really powerful magic — and the unbinding-spell itself had been a risk — sooner or later she would attract the attention of whichever Pilgrim Adept had come here. With the kind of luck that seemed to be dogging her, it would be one of her worst enemies within the Order: Rabben the Half-handed, or Beccolo, or....

Lythande grimaced. Bitter as it was to concede defeat, the safest course seemed to be to go north as the *larith* sword wanted. If, then, when she arrived there, she could somehow contrive to return the sword to Larith's own shrine. She had resolved to leave Old Gandrin anyway, and one direction was no better than another.

So be it. She would take the damned thing north to the Forbidden Shrine, and there she would leave it. Somehow she would manage to plant it on someone who could enter the shrine where she could not enter ... rather, the worst was that she *could* enter but dared not be known to do so. Northward, then, to Larith's shrine—

But within the hour, though Lythande had been in Old Gandrin for a score of sunrises and should have known her way, the Adept was hopelessly lost. Whatever path Lythande found through marketplace or square, thieves' market or red-lamp quarter, however she tried to keep the sun on her right hand, within minutes she was hopelessly turned round. Four separate times she inquired for the north gate, and once it was actually within sight, when it seemed as if the cobbled street would shake itself and give itself a little twist, and Lythande would discover she was lost in the labyrinthine old streets again. Finally,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

exhausted, furiously hungry and thirsty, and without a chance of finding a moment to eat or drink in privacy now that the sun was high and the streets thronged, she dropped grimly on the edge of a fountain in a public square, maddened by the splashing of the water she dared not drink, and sat there to think it over.

What did the damned thing want, anyway? She was bound north to the Forbidden Shrine as she thought she was commanded to go, yet she was prevented by the sword, or by the magic in the sword, from finding the northern gate, as she had been prevented from taking the road south. Was she to stay in Old Gandrin indefinitely? That did not seem reasonable, but then, there was nothing reasonable about this business.

At least this will teach me to mind my own business in the future!

Grimly, Lythande considered what alternatives were open. To try and find the burial place of the ravished Laritha and bury the sword with a binding-spell stronger yet? Even if she could find the place, she had no assurance that the sword would stay buried, and all kinds of assurances that it would not. The chances now seemed that all the power of the Blue Star would be expended in vain, unless Lythande wished to expend that kind of power that would in turn leave her powerless for days.

To seek safety in the Place Which Is Not, outside the boundaries of the world, and there attempt to find out what the sword really wanted and why it would not allow her to leave the city? For that, the cover of darkness was needful; was she to spend this day aimlessly wandering the streets of Old Gandrin? The smell of food from a nearby cookshop tantalized her, but she was accustomed to that and resolutely ignored it. Later, in some deserted street or alley, some of the dried fruit in the pockets of the mage-robe might find their way into her mouth, but not now.

At least she could enjoy a moment's rest here on the fountain. But even as that thought crossed her mind, she discovered she was on her feet and moving restlessly across the square, thrusting the little packet of smoking-herbs back into the pocket.

She wondered angrily where in the hells she was going now. Her hand was lightly on the hilt of the *larith* sword, and she could only hope that none of the bystanders in the street could see it or would know what it meant if they did. She bashed into someone who snarled at her and accused her in a surly tone of some perversion involving being a rapist of immature nanny goats. The profanity of Old Gandrin, she concluded, was no more imaginative, and just as repetitive, as it was anywhere beneath the blinded eye of Keth-Ketha.

Across the fountain square, then, and into a narrow, winding street that emerged, a good half hour's walk

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

later, into another square, this one facing a long, narrow barracks. Lythande was in a curiously dreamy state that she recognized, later, as almost hypnotic; she watched herself from inside, walking purposefully across the square, quite as if she knew where she was going and why, feeling that at any time, if she wished, she *could* resist this eerie compulsion — but that was simply too much trouble; why not go along and see what the *larith* wanted?

Four men were sloshing their faces in the great water trough before the barracks, their riding animals snorting in the water beside them. The Larith's sword was in her hand, and one man's head was bobbing like an apple in the water trough before Lythande knew what she — or rather, the sword — was doing. A second went down, spitted, before the other two had their swords out. The *larith* sword had lost its compulsion and was slack in her hand as she heard their outraged shouts, thinking ironically that she was as bewildered by the whole thing as they were, or maybe more so. She scrambled to get control of the sword, for now she was fighting for her life. There was no way these men were going to let her escape, now that she had slain two of their companions unprovoked. She managed to disarm one man, but the second drove her back and back, holding her ground as best she could; thrust, parry, recover, lunge — her foot slipped in something slick on the ground, and she went down, staggering for the support of the wall; somehow got the sword up and saw it go into the man's breast; he groaned and fell across the bodies of his companions, two dead and one sorely wounded.

Lythande started to turn away, sickened and outraged — at least the fifth man need not be murdered in cold blood — then realized she had no choice. That survivor could testify to a magician with the Blue Star blazing between hairless brows, bearing the *larith* sword, and any Pilgrim Adept who might ever hear the story would know that Lythande had borne the *larith* unscathed. As only a woman could do. She whipped out the sword again. The man shouted, "Help! Murder! Don't kill me, I have no quarrel with you—" and took to his heels, but Lythande strode swiftly after him, like a relentless avenging angel, and ran him through, grimacing in sick self-disgust. Then she ran, seeing other men flooding out of the barracks at their comrades' death cries, losing herself in the tangle of streets again.

Eventually, she had to stop to recover her breath. Why had the sword demanded those deaths? Immediately the answer came, imprinting the faces of the first two men she had killed — or the sword had killed almost without her help or knowledge — on her mind; they had been in the jeering circle of men who had rav-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ished the dying priestess-swordswoman. So among other powers, the *larith* sword was spelled to vengeance on its own.

But she, Lythande, had not even stopped with killing the men the sword wished to kill. She had killed the other two men in cold blood to protect the secret of her sex and her magic.

Now the damned thing has entangled me not only in someone else's magic but in someone else's revenge!

Had the sword drunk its fill, or was it one of those that would go on killing and killing until it was somehow, unthinkably, sated? But now it seemed quiet enough in her scabbard. And after all, when she had killed the two who had either witnessed or shared in the rape of the Laritha, the compulsion had departed; the others she had killed more or less of her own free will.

A picture flashed behind her eyes: a burly man with a hook nose and ginger whiskers. He had been in the crowd around the dying Laritha and had escaped. He was not in the barracks behind the fountain, or no doubt the sword would have dragged her inside to kill him, probably killing everyone that lay between them.

Now, perhaps, she could depart the city — she was not sure how far to the north lay the Forbidden Shrine, but she grudged every hour now before the *larith* sword was out of her hands.

And I swear, from this day forth, I will never interfere — come battle, arson, murder, rape, or death — in any of the 9,090 forms the blinded eye of Keth has seen. I have had enough of somebody else's magic!

Lythande turned and took a path toward the northern gate, striding with a long, competent pace that fairly ate up the distance, and that compelled young children playing in the streets or idlers lounging there to get out of the way, sometimes with most undignified haste. Still, it was late in the day and one of the pallid moons had appeared, like a shadowy corpse-face in the sky, before she sighted the northern gate. But she was no longer heading in its direction.

Damnation! Had the thing spotted another prey? Now it took all Lythande's concentration to keep from snatching out the *larith* and holding it in her hand. She tried, deliberately, to slow her pace. She *could* do it, when she concentrated, which relieved her a little; at least she was not completely helpless before the magic of the Larithae. But it took fierce effort, and whenever her concentration slipped even a little, she was hurrying, pushed on by the infernal thing that nagged at her. If only it would let her know where it was going!

No doubt the dead and ravished Laritha, the priestess who owned the sword or was owned by it, *she* was in the sword's confidence. Would Lythande really want that, to be sym-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

biote, sharing consciousness and purpose with some damned enchanted sword? Or was the sword enchanted only by the death of its owner, and did the Larithae normally carry it only for the purposes of an ordinary weapon?

She wished the wretched sword would make up its mind. Again the face renewed itself in her mind, a man with ginger whiskers and a hook nose, but the chin of a rabbit with protruding buck teeth. Of course. Most men who would stoop to rape were ugly and near to impotence, anyhow; anything recognizably male could get a woman without resorting to force.

Damn it, must she track down and kill everyone even in the crowd who had seen? If all who had witnessed the violation were dead, was the disgrace then canceled, or did it run so in the philosophy of the Larithae and their swords? She didn't want to know any more about it than she knew already. She wanted only to be rid of the thing.

"Have a care where you step, ravisher of virgin goats," snarled a passerby, and Lythande realized she had stumbled again in her haste. She forced herself to stammer an apology, glad that the mage-robe was drawn about her face so that the Blue Star was invisible. Damn it, this had gone far enough. It was beginning to infringe on her very personality — she was Lythande, the core of whose reputation was for appearing and disappearing as if made of shadow. Her best spells could not rid her of it. She must now contrive to give it what it wanted, and be done with it, and swiftly. It would be just as bad if the marketplace gossiped about an Adept of the Blue Star bearing Larith magic, as if she should encounter her worst enemy so; only less swift.

It would easier if she knew where she was going. There was the continual temptation to fall into the dreamy hypnotic state, dragged on by the *larith* sword; but Lythande fought to remain alert. Once again she was lost in the tangled streets of a quarter in the city where she had never been. And then, crossing the square in front of a wineshop, one of those where the customs and drinkers all came spilling out into the street, she saw him: Ginger Whiskers.

She wanted to stop and get a good look at the man she was fated to kill. It was against her principles to kill, for unknown reasons, men whose names she did not know.

Yet she knew enough about him; he had violated, or attempted to violate, or witnessed the violation of a Laritha. In general, if rape were a capital crime in Old Gandrin, the city would be depopulated, thought Lythande; or inhabited only by women and those virgin goats who formed such a part in the profanity of that city. She supposed that was why there were not many unaccompanied wom-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

en walking the streets in Old Gandrin.

The Laritha and I. And she did not escape; and I only because my womanhood is unknown. The women of Old Gandrin seem to submit to that unwritten law, that the woman who walks alone can expect no more than ravishment. The Laritha sought to challenge it, and died.

But she will be avenged.... And Lythande swore under her breath. She was acting as if it mattered a damn to her if every woman who had not the sense of wisdom to stay out of a ravisher's hands paid the penalty of that foolishness or incaution. She had had her fill of taking upon herself someone else's curse and someone else's magic.

Was the sword of *larith*, then, which might never be borne by a man, beginning to work its accursed magic upon her? Lythande stopped dead in the middle of the square, trying not to stare across the intervening space at Ginger Whiskers. If she fought the sword's magic, could she let him live and turn and go on her way? Let someone else right the wrongs of the Larithae!

What, after all, have I to do with women? If they do not wish for the common fate of women, let them do as I have done, renounce skirts and silks and the arts of the women's quarters, and put on sword and breeches or a mage-robe and dare the risks I have dared to leave all that behind me. I paid dear for my immunity.

She suspected the Laritha had paid no less a price. But that was, after all, none of her concern. She took a deep breath, summoned her strongest spell, and by a great effort turned her back on Ginger Whiskers, walking in the opposite direction.

Just in time, too. The hood of Lythande's mage-robe was drawn over her head, concealing the Blue Star; but beneath the heavy folds she could feel the small stinging that meant the star was flaming, sparkling, and could see the blue lightnings above her eyes. *Magic....*

It was not the *larith* sword. That was quiet in her belt ... no, somehow she had it in her hands. Lythande stood quietly, trying to fight back, and dared a peep beneath the mage-robe.

It was not the flare of the Blue Star between her brows. Somehow she had seen, had seen ... where was it, what had she seen? The man's back was turned to her, she could see the brown folds of a mage-robe not too unlike her own; but though she could not see forehead or star, she felt the Blue Star resonate in time with her own.

He would feel it, too. I had better get out of here as fast as I can. Which settled it. Ginger Whiskers would not pay for his part in the ravishment of the Laritha. She, Lythande, had had enough of someone else's magic; she would take the *larith* sword north-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ward to its shrine, but she was not, by Chaos and the Last Battle, going to be seen here in the presence of another of her Order, doing battle — or call it by its right name, murder — with a *larith* sword.

The sword was quiet in her hand and made no apparent struggle when she slid it back into the scabbard, though at the last moment it seemed to Lythande that it squirmed a little, reluctant to be forced into the sheath. Too bad, she would give it no choice. Lythande muttered the words of a bonding-spell to keep it there, carefully slipped behind a pillar in the square, and cautiously, moving like a breath of wind or a northland ghost, circled about until she could see, unseen, the man in the mage-robe. On her forehead, the Blue Star throbbed, and she could see by tiny movements of the man's hood that he, too, was trying to look about him unseen to know if another Pilgrim Adept was truly within the crowd in the square. Well, that was her greatest skill, to see without being seen.

The man's hands, long-fingered and muscular, swordsman's hands, were clasped over the staff he bore. Not Rabben the Half-handed, then. He was tall and burly; if it was Ruhaven, he was one of her few friends in the Order, and he was not a north-country man, he would not know the technicalities of a Larith curse, would not, probably, know that a larith could be borne only by a woman. Lythande toyed briefly with the notion, if it *was* Ruhaven, of making some part of her predicament known to him. No more than she must, only that she had become saddled with an enchanted sword, perhaps ask his help in formulating a stronger unbinding-spell.

The Pilgrim Adept turned with a slight twitch of his shoulders, and Lythande caught a glimpse of dark hair under the hood. Not Ruhaven, then — Ruhaven's gray hair was already turning white — and he was the only one in the Order to whom she felt she might have turned, at least before the Last Battle between Law and Chaos.

And then the Pilgrim Adept made a gesture she recognized, and Lythande ducked her head further within the mage-robe's folds and tried to slither into the crowd, to reach its edge and drift unseen into the alley beyond the square and the tavern. Beccolo! It could hardly be worse. Yes, he thought Lythande a man. But they had once been pitted, within the Temple of the Star, in a magical duel, and it had not been Lythande who had lost face that day.

Beccolo might not know the details of Larith magic. He probably did not. But if he once recognized her, and especially if he should guess that she was hag-ridden by a curse, he would be in a hurry to have his revenge.

And then with horror Lythande realized that while she was thinking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about Beccolo and her consternation that it should be one of her worst enemies within the Pilgrim Adepts, she had lost her fierce concentration, by which alone she had kept control of the *larith* sword; it was out of the scabbard, naked now in her hand, and she was striking straight through the crowd, men and women shrinking back from her purposeful stride. Ginger Whiskers saw her and shrank back in consternation. Yesterday he had stood and cheered on the violation of a Larith — at least, of a woman rendered helpless by fearful odds. And he had been among those who took to their heels as a tall, lean fighter in a mage-robe with a Blue Star blazing lightning had cut down four men within as many seconds.

His bench went over and he kicked away the man who went down with it, making for the far end of the square. Lythande thought, wrathfully: Go on, get the hell out of here; I don't want to kill you any more than you want to be killed. And she knew Beccolo's eyes were on her, and on the Blue Star now blazing between her brows. And Beccolo would have known her without that. Known her for the fellow Pilgrim Adept who had humiliated him in the outer courts of the Temple of the Star, when they were both novices and before the blazing star was set between either of their brows.

She almost thought for a moment that he would get away. Then she kicked the fallen bench aside and leaped on him, the sword out to run him through. This one was not so easy; he had jerked out his own sword and warded her off with no small skill. Men and women and children surged back to leave them a clear space for fighting, and Lythande, angry because she did not really want to kill him at all, nevertheless knew it was a fight for life, a fight she dared not lose. She crashed down backward, stumbling as she backed away; and then the world went into slow motion. It seemed a minute, an hour that Ginger Whiskers bent over her, sword in hand, coming at her naked throat slowly, slowly. And then Lythande's foot was in his belly, he grunted in pain, and then she had scrambled to her feet and her sword went through his throat. She backed away from the jetting blood. Her only feeling was rage, not against Ginger Whiskers, but against the *larith*. She slammed it back into the scabbard and strode away without stopping to look back. Fortunately, the *larith* did not resist this time, and she made off toward the northern gate. Maybe she could make it there before Beccolo could get through the crowd to trail her. Within mere minutes, Lythande was out of the city and striding north, and behind her — as yet — there was no sign of Beccolo. Of course not. How could he know to which quarter of the compass she was making her course?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

• • •

All that day, and into much of the night that followed, Lythande strode northward at a steady pace that ate up the leagues. She was weary and would have welcomed rest, but the nagging compulsion of the *larith* at her belt allowed her no halt. At least this way — she thought dimly — there was less likelihood that Beccolo would trail her out of the city and northward.

Shortly after Keth sank into the darkness, in the dim half-twilight of Reth's darkened eye, she paused for a time on the bank of a river, but she could not rest; she only cleaned, with meticulous care, the blade of the *larith* and secured it in the scabbard. Dim humps and hillocks on the riverbank showed where travelers slept, and she surveyed them with vague envy, but soon she strode on, walking swiftly with apparent purpose. But in reality she moved within a dark dream, hardly aware when the last dim light of Reth's setting beams died away altogether. After a time, the blotched and leprous face of the larger moon cast a little light on the pathway, but it made no difference to Lythande's pace.

She did not know where she was going. The sword knew, and that seemed to be enough.

Some hidden part of Lythande knew what was happening to her and was infuriated. It was her work as magician to act, not to remain passive and be acted upon. That was for women, and again she felt the revulsion to this kind of women's sorcery where the priestess became passive tool in the hands of her sword ... that was no better than being slave to a man! But perhaps the Larithae themselves were not so bound; she had been put under compulsion by the ravished Laritha and had no choice.

The Laritha requited the impulse that caused me to stop, in the vain hope of saving her life or delivering her from her ravishers — by binding me with this curse! And when that came to her mind, Lythande would curse softly and vow revenge on the Larithae. But most of that night she walked in that same waking dream, her mind empty of thought.

Under cover of the darkness, on her solitary road, she munched dried fruit, her mind as empty as a cow chewing its cud. Toward morning she slept for a little, in the shelter of a thicket of trees, careful to set a watch-spell that would waken her if anyone came within thirty paces. She wondered at herself; in man's garb, she had wandered everywhere beneath the Twin Suns, and now she was behaving like a fearful woman afraid of ravishment; was it the *larith,* accustomed to being borne by women who did not conceal their sex, but walked abroad defending it as they must, that had put this woman's watchfulness again on her? How many years had it been since Lythande had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even considered the possibility that she might be surprised alone, stripped, discovered as a woman?

She felt rage — and worse, revulsion — at herself that she could still think in these woman's ways. As if I were a woman in truth, not a magician, she thought furiously, and for a moment the rage she felt congested in her forehead and brought tears to her eyes, and she forced them back with an effort that sent pain lancing through her head.

But I am a woman, she thought, and then in a furious backlash: No! I am a magician, not a woman! The wizard is neither male nor female, but a being apart! She resolved to take off the watch-spell and sleep in her customary uncaring peace, but when she tried it, her heart pounded, and finally she set the watch-spell again to guard her and fell asleep. Was it the sword itself that was fearful, guarding the slumbers of the woman who bore it?

When she woke, Keth was divided in half at the eastern horizon, and she moved on, her jaw grim and set as she covered the ground with the long, even-striding paces that ate up the distance under her feet. She was growing accustomed to the weight of the *larith* at her waist; absently, now and again, her hand caressed it. A light sword, an admirable sword for the hand of a woman.

Children were playing at the second river; they scattered back to their mothers as Lythande approached the ferry, flinging coins at the ferryman in a silent rage. *Children. I might have had children, had my life gone otherwise, and that is a deeper magic than my own.* She could not tell whence that alien thought had come. Even as a young maiden, she had never felt anything but revulsion at the thought of subjecting herself to the desire of a man, and when her maiden companions giggled and whispered together about that eventuality, Lythande had stood apart, scornful, shrugging with contempt. Her name had not been Lythande then. She had been called ... and Lythande started with horror, knowing that in the ripples of the lapping water she had *almost* heard the sound of her old name, a name she had sworn never again to speak when once she put on men's garb, a name she had vowed to forget; no, *a name she had forgotten ... altogether forgotten.*

"Are you fearful, traveler?" asked a gentle voice beside her. "The ferry rocks about, it is true, but never in human memory has it capsized nor has a passenger fallen into the water, and this ferry has run here since before the Goddess came northward to establish her shrine as Larith. You are quite safe."

Lythande muttered ungracious thanks, refusing to look round. She could sense the form of the young girl at her shoulder, smiling up expectantly at her. It would be noted if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she did not speak, if she simply moved northward like the accursed, hell-driven thing she was. She cast about for some innocuous thing to say.

"Have you traveled this road often?" she asked.

"Often, yes, but never so far," said the gentle girlish voice. "Now I travel north to the Forbidden Shrine, where the Goddess reigns as Larith. Know you the shrine?"

Lythande mumbled that she had heard of it. She thought the words would choke her.

"If I am accepted," the young voice went on, "I shall serve the Goddess as one of her priestesses, a Laritha."

Lythande turned slowly to look at the speaker. She was very young, with that boyish look some young girls keep until they are in their twenties or more. The magician asked quietly, "Why, child? Know you not that every man's hand will be against you?" and stopped herself. She had been on the point of telling the story of the woman who had been ravished and killed in the streets of Old Gandrin.

The young girl's smile was luminous. "But if every man's hand is against me, still, I shall have all those who serve the Goddess at my side."

Lythande found herself opening her lips for something cynical. That had not been her experience, that women could stand together. Yet why should she spoil this girl's illusion? Let her find it out herself, in bitterness. This girl still cherished a dream that women could be sisters. Why should Lythande foul and embitter that dream before she must? She turned pointedly away and stared at the muddy water under the prow of the ferry.

The girl did not move away from her side. From under the mage-hood, Lythande surveyed her without seeming to do so: the ripples of sunny hair, the unlined forehead, the small snub nose still indefinite, the lips and earlobes so soft that they looked babyish, the soft little fingers, the boyish freckles she did not trouble to paint.

If she goes to the Larith shrine, perhaps then I might prevail upon her to take the sword of Larith thither. Yet if she knows that I, an apparent male, bear such a sword — if she goes to petition the shrine — surely she must know that no man may lay a hand upon one of the *larith* swords without such penalty as were better imagined than spoken.

And since I bear that sword unscathed, then am I either accused of blasphemy — or revealed as a woman, naked to my enemies. And now, close to her destination, Lythande realized her dilemma. Neither as a man nor as a woman could she step inside the shrine of the Goddess as Larith. What, then, could she do with the sword?

The sword didn't care. So long as the damned thing got home in one piece, she supposed, it mattered not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what the carrier was — swordswoman, a girl like that one, or one of those virgin goats who played such a part in the profanity of Gandrin. If she simply asked the girl to take it to the shrine, she revealed either her blasphemy or her true sex.

She might plant the sword upon her, spelled or enchanted into something else; a loaf of bread, perhaps, as the herb-seller had been given barley grains spelled to look like gold. It was not, after all, as if she were sending anything into the Larith shrine to do them harm, only something of its own, and something, moreover, that had played hell with Lythande's life and given her four — no, five; no, there were all the ones she had killed over the body of the Laritha — had given her eleven or a dozen lives to fight among the legions of the dead at the Last Battle where Law shall fight at last against Chaos and conquer or die once and for all. And something that had dragged Lythande all this weary way to get back where it was going.

She seriously considered that. Give the girl the sword, enchanted to look like something other than what it was. A gift for the shrine of the Goddess as Larith.

The girl was still standing at her side. Lythande knew her voice was abrupt and harsh. "Well, will you take a gift to the shrine, then, from me?"

The girl's guileless smile seemed to mock her. "I cannot. This Goddess accepts no gifts save from her own."

Lythande said with a cynical smile, "You say so? The key to every shrine is forged of gold, and the more gold, the nearer the heart of the shrine, or the god."

The girl looked as if Lythande had slapped her. But after a moment, she said quietly, "Then I am sorry you have known such shrines and such gods, traveler. No man may know our Goddess, or I would try to show you better," and looked down at the deck. Rebuked, Lythande stood silent as the ferry bumped gently against the land. The passengers on the ferry began to stream onto the shore. Lythande awaited the subsidence of the crowd, the *larith* sword for once quiet inside the mage-robe.

The town was small, a straggle of houses, farms outside the gates, and high on the hill above a sprawling market, the shrine of Larith. One thing, at least, the girl spoke true: there was nothing of gold about this shrine, at least where the passerby could see; it was a massive fortress of unpretentious gray stone.

Lythande noticed that the girl was still at her side as she stepped onshore. "One gift at least your Goddess has accepted from the sex she affects to despise," Lythande said. "No women's hands built that keep, which is more fortress than shrine to my eyes!"

"No, you are mistaken," the girl said. "Do you not believe, stranger, that a woman could be as strong

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as you yourself?"

"No," Lythande said, "I do not. One woman in a hundred — a thousand, perhaps. The others are weak."

"But if we are weak," said the girl, "still our hands our many." She spoke a formal farewell, and Lythande, repeating it, jaws clenched, stood and watched her walk away.

Why am I so angry? Why did I wish to hurt her?

And the answer rushed over her in a flood. *Because she goes where I can never go, goes freely. There was a time when I would willingly have pawned my soul, had there been a place where a woman might go to learn the arts of sorcery and the skills of the sword. Yet there was no place, no place. I pawned my soul and my sex to seek the secrets of the Blue Star, and this, this soft-handed child, with her patter of sisterhood ... where were my sisters on that day when I knew despair and renounced the truth of my self? I stood alone; it was not enough that every man's hand was against me on that day, every woman's hand was against me as well!*

Pain beat furiously in her head, pain that made her clench her teeth and scowl and tighten her fists on the hilts of her own twin swords. One would think, she said to herself, deliberately distancing herself from the pain, that I were about to weep. But I forgot how to weep more than a century ago, and no doubt there will be more cause than this for weeping before I stand at the Last Battle and fight against Chaos. But I shall not live to that battle unless somehow I can contrive to enter where no man may enter and return the cursed *larith* where it belongs!

For already she felt, streaming from the *larith,* the same intense, nagging compulsion, to plunge up the hill, walk into the shrine, and throw down the sword before the Goddess who had dragged it here and Lythande with it.

Within the shrine, all women are welcomed as sisters.... did the whisper come from the girl who had spoken of the shrine? Or did it come from the sword itself, eager to tempt her on with someone else's magic? *Not I. It is too late for me.* Through the pain in her head, Lythande's old watchfulness suddenly asserted itself. The ferry had moved from the shore again, and at the far shore, passengers again were streaming on its deck. Among them, among them — no, it was too far to see, but with the magical sight of the Blue Star throbbing between her brows, Lythande knew a form in a mage-robe not unlike her own. Somehow Beccolo had trailed her here.

He did not necessarily know the laws of the shrine. All of the north-country was scattered with shrines to every god from the God of Smiths to the Goddess of Light Love. And her shrine, too, is forbidden to me, as all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is forbidden save the magical arts for which I renounced all. Forbidden to men lest they know my Secret; to women, lest some man attempt to wrest it from them.... Beccolo probably did not know the peculiarities of the Larithae. If she could lead him into the shrine itself somehow, then would the priestesses work on him the wrath they were reputed to work on every man who found his way inside there, and then would Lythande be free of his meddling. What, indeed, would the Goddess as Larith do to any man who penetrated her shrine as Lythande had done to the Temple of the Blue Star, in disguise, wearing the garb and the guise of a sex that was not her own?

She fought to resist the magical compulsion in her mind. The *larith* that had brought her all this way, almost sleepwalking, was now awake and screaming to be returned to its home, and Lythande could hear that screaming in her mind, even as her own rage and confusion fought to silence it. She could not enter the Larith's shrine as Lythande, nor as the Adept of the Blue Star, though at least if she did, Beccolo could not follow her there — or if he tried, would meet swift vengeance.

She saw the ferry approaching the shore, and now could see with her own tired eyes, not with the magical sight, the narrow form of the Pilgrim Adept who had trailed her all this long way. The Twin Suns stood high in the sky, Keth racing Reth for the zenith, dazzling the water into brilliant swords of light that blinded Lythande's eyes with painful flame. She stepped into the market, trying to summon around herself the magical stillness, so that everywhere beneath the Twin Suns those who knew Lythande spoke of the magician's ability to appear or disappear before their very eyes.

Most women seek to attract all men's eyes. Even before I came to the Temple of the Blue Star, I sought to turn their eyes away. Magic cannot give to any magician the thing not desired.

And as that thought came within her mind, Lythande stood perfectly still. All the long road here, she had cursed the mischance that had led her into somebody else's magic. Yet nothing bad forced her to turn aside from her path to save the Laritha from violation; she could never have been entangled in the magic of the *larith* sword had something within her not consented to it. Had she turned aside from a woman's ravishment, then would Lythande have been supporting Chaos in the place of Law.

Nonsense. What is a stranger woman to me? And, pain splitting her head asunder, Lythande fought the answer that came, without her consent and against her will.

She is myself. She walks where I dare not, a woman for all to see.

In a rage, Lythande turned aside

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and sought darkness between the stalls of a market. Early as it was in the day, men brawled in the shadow of a wineshop. Market women milked their goats and sold the fresh milk. A caravan master loaded protesting pack animals. In Lythande's mind, the *larith* sword nagged, knowing its home was not far.

Could she send it now by some unwitting traveler bound for the shrine? She could not enter. She need not. Perhaps now she could seek a binding-spell that would return it home, or an unbinding-spell, now that the *larith* was in its own country, to free her of its curse, as she had freed herself of the curse of being no more than woman when the Blue Star was set between her brows. She had performed the most massive unbinding-spell of all, culminating in that day when she had been doom-set to live forever as what she had pretended to be. This lesser unbinding-spell should be simple by comparison with that.

From here she could survey, unseen, the upward road to the shrine of the Larithae. Women went upward, seeking whatever mysterious comfort they could have from that Goddess; they led goats to the shrine, whether for sacrifice or to sell milk Lythande neither knew or cared. She fancied that among them she could see the young girl of the ferry, who had come to offer herself to the Goddess, and Lythande found herself following, in her mind, that young girl whose name she would never know.

Never could I have been entangled in the magic of the Larithae, or in anyone else's magic, unless something within me claimed it as mine, Lythande thought. It was not a comfortable thought. Was I perhaps secretly longing for the womanhood I had renounced and for which the Laritha died?

Was it a will to death that brought me here?

Rage and the pain in her head, flaring like the lightnings of the Blue Star, burst in revulsion. What folly is it that dragged me here, questioning all that I am and all that I have done? I am Lythande! Who dares challenge me, man or woman or goddess?

One would think I had come here to die as a woman among my own kind! And what would these sworn priestesses, sworn to the sword and to magic, think then of a woman who had renounced her self—?

But I did not renounce my self! Only my vulnerabilty to the hazards of being woman and bearing sword and magic....

Which they bear with such courage as they can, her mind reminded her, and again the dying eyes of the ravished Laritha, smiling as she pressed the sword into Lythande's fingers, haunted her. Well. So she died for walking abroad as a woman. That was *her* choice. This is mine, Lythande said to herself, and clutched the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mage-robe about her, setting her hand on her two swords — the right-handed knife for the enemies of this world, the knife on the left for the evils and terrors of magic. And the *larith* sword, tucked uncomfortably between them. *Still, I am Lythande!*

The shrine is forbidden to me, as the silk-woman of Jumathe were forbidden to me. And into that shrine I went, among the blind silk-weavers. But the Larithae are not so conveniently devoid of sight. If I walk among them as an Adept of the Blue Star, they will believe — as the overseer of the blind silk-women believed — that I am a man come among them to despoil or conquer. The very best that could befall is that I should be stripped and revealed a woman. And soon or late, the ripples stirred by that stone would reach my enemies, and Lythande be proclaimed abroad what no man may know.

She was walking now between two stalls where articles of women's clothing were displayed in brilliant folds, colorfully woven skirts of the thick cotton of the Salt Deserts, long scarves and shawls, all the soft and colored things women doted on and for which they pawned their lives and their souls, pretty trash! Lythande curled her lip with scorn and contempt, then stood completely motionless.

It is forbidden that any man may know me for a woman. For on that day when any man shall speak it aloud or hear that I am a woman, then is my Power forfeit to him and I may be slain like a beast. Yet within the walls of the Larith shrine, no man may come, so no man may see. The idea flamed in her mind with the brilliance of Keth-Ketha at zenith; she would penetrate the shrine of the Larithae *disguised as a woman!*

It is truly a disguise, she thought with a curl of her lip. She had no idea how many years it had been since she had worn women's garb, and by now it would be pure pretense to put it on. It was no longer her self.

Nor could she, a man, purchase such things openly. If an apparent man should vanish after purchasing women's garments, and a strange woman, suddenly appear at the shrine — well, one could not conveniently hope that all the Larithae would be so conveniently stupid, nor all who kept their gates and brought them gifts.

She must, then, manage to steal the garments unseen. No very great trick, after all, for one whose teasing nickname in the outer courts of the Blue Star had been "Lythande, the Shadow." To appear and disappear unseen was her special gift. She had begun to move stealthily, a shadow against the darkness of the tents of the sellers, out of sight of Keth and Reth. Later that day, a skirt-seller would discover that only six skirts hung in their colorful bands where seven had hung before; a seller of fards and cosmetics discovered that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

three little pots of paint had vanished before his very eyes, and although he remembered a lanky stranger in a mage-robe lounging nearby, he would swear he had not taken his eyes for a minute from the stranger's hands; and a woolen shawl and a veil likewise found their way out of a tangled pile of castoffs and were never missed at all.

Keth was declining again when a lean and angular woman, with an awkward bundle on her back, striding like a man, made her way up the hill toward the shrine. Her forehead appeared strangely scarred, and her eyebrows and cheeks were painted, her eyes deeply underlined with kohl. She stumbled against a woman leading pack animals, who cursed her as a despoiler of virgin goats. So they had that oath here, too. Lythande was ready to assure the woman, in that mellow and cynical voice, that her maiden beasts were perfectly safe, but it seemed not worth the trouble. Wearing the unfamiliar garments of a woman was penance enough. At least she could bear the *larith* openly, tied awkwardly about her waist as a woman not accustomed to the handling of a sword would do. And she knew she moved so clumsily in the skirts she had not had about her knees in a century, that at any moment she might be accused of being a man in disguise. Which would, she thought grimly, be the ultimate irony.

I have worn a mask for more years than most of this crowd has been alive. Against her will, she remembered an old horror tale that a nurse, decades since dust and ashes, had told to frighten a girl whose name Lythande now honestly could not remember, of a mask worn so long that it had frozen to the face and *become* the face. *I have become what I pretended. And that is all my reward or my punishment.*

There is no woman, now, under these skirts, and it would be just, she thought, if I were exposed as a man. Yet she had considered and refused a glamouring-spell that might make her more visibly a woman. She would go into the Larith shrine with such resources as were her own, without magic. Yet the Blue Star beneath the paint throbbed as if with unshed tears.

Between a woman leading goats and a woman bearing a sick child, Lythande stepped between the pillars of the shrine of the Goddess as Larith, built at some time by the hands of women. She did not know or care when she had begun to believe that. But obscurely it comforted her that women could build such an edifice.

Against her will, a curious question nagged at her, like the voice of the *larith* tied clumsily with a rope at her waist:

If I had not forsaken or forsworn myself for the Blue Star, if I had joined my hands to the weak and de-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spised hands of my sisters, would this temple have risen the sooner? She dismissed the thought with an effort that made her eyes throb, asking herself in scornful wrath, *If the stone lions of Khoumari had kittened, would the Khoumari shepards guard their lambs more safely of nights?*

She stood on a great floor, mosaiced in black and white stone in a pentagram pattern. Above her rose a great blue dome, and before her stood the great figure of the Goddess as Larith, fashioned of stone and without any trace of gold. The girl had spoken truth, then. And at the far end, where a litle band of priestesses stood, accepting the gifts of the pilgrims in that outer court, she fancied she could see the slender and boyish form of the girl among them. It was only fancy! No doubt they had whisked her away into their inner courts, there to await that mysterious transition into a Laritha, under the eyes of their stone Goddess. A pregnant warrior! Lythande heard herself make a small inner sound of contempt, but she was in their territory and she knew she dared not draw attention to herself. She must behave like a woman and be meek and silent here. Well, she was skilled at disguise; it was no more than a challenge to her.

I would like to take the girl with me, rather than letting her go to these women-sorceresses and their flimsy magic! (Not so flimsy, after all; it had dragged her here!) *I would teach her the arts of the sword and the laws of magic. I would be alone no longer....*

Daydream. Fantasy. Yet it persisted. Outsiders might think her no more than a mercenary-magician who traveled with an apprentice, as many did; and even if any of them suspected her apprentice to be a maiden, they would think her only the more manly. And the girl would know her secret, but it would not matter, for Lythande would be teacher, master, lover....

The woman ahead of her, bearing a sick child, was standing now before the priestess of the Larith who accepted gifts for the shrine. The woman tried to hand her a golden bracelet, but the priestess shook her head.

"The Goddess accepts gifts only from her own, my sister. Larith the Compassionate bestows gifts upon the children of men, but does not accept them. You would have healing for your son? Go through yonder door into the outer court, and one of the healers there shall give you a brew for his fever; the Goddess is merciful."

The woman murmured thanks and knelt for a blessing, and Lythande was looking into the eyes of the priestess.

"I bring you — your own," said Lythande, and fumbled at the strings that bore the *larith* sword. For the first time, she looked at it clearly and found she was cradling it in her fingers as if reluctant to let it go. The priestess said, in her gentle voice,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How have you come by this?"

"One of your own lay violated and dying; she spelled this sword to me that I should return it here."

The priestess — she was old, Lythande thought; not as old as Lythande, but no magical immunity gave her the appearance of youth — said gently, "Then you have our thanks, my sister." Her eyes rested on the reluctance with which Lythande's fingers released the blade. Her voice was even more gentle.

"You may remain here if you will, my sister. You may be trained in the ways of the sword and of magic, and will wander the world no more alone."

Here? Within walls? Among women? Lythande felt her lip curling again with scorn, and yet her eyes ached. *If I had not forgotten how, I would think I were about to weep.*

"I thank you," she forced herself to say thickly, "but I cannot. I am pledged elsewhere."

"Then I honor what oath keeps you, Sister," the priestess said, and Lythande knew she should turn from the shrine. Yet she made no move to go, and the priestess asked her softly, "What would you have from the Goddess in return for this great gift?"

"It is no gift," said Lythande bluntly. "I had no choice, or I would not have come; surely you must know that your *larith* swords do not await a freely given pilgrimage. I came at the *larith*'s will, not my own. And you have no gifts I seek."

"Gifts are not always asked," said the priestess, almost inaudibly, and laid her hands in blessing on Lythande's brow. "May you be healed of the pain you cannot speak, my sister."

I am no sister of yours! But Lythande did not speak the words aloud; she pressed her lips tight against them, and saw blue lights glare against the priestess's fingers. Would the woman expose her, recognizing the Blue Star? But the woman only made a gesture of blessing, and Lythande turned away.

At least it was over. Her venture into the Larith shrine was ended, and now she must get out safely. She held her breath as she recrossed the great mosaic floor with the pattern of stars. She passed beneath the doorway and out of the shrine. Now, standing again in the free light of Keth, trailed down the sky by the eye of Reth, she had come safe and free from this adventure of someone else's magic.

And then a cynical voice cut through her sense of sudden peace.

"By all the gods, Lythande! So the Shadow is at his old trick of thievery and silence? And you have forced yourself into this alien shrine? How much of their gold did you cozen from their shrine, O Lythande?"

The voice of Beccolo! So even in women's garments, he had recognized her! But of course he would think it only the most clever and subtle of disguises.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There is no gold in the shrine of the Larithae," she said in her most mellow tones. "But if you doubt me, Beccolo, seek for yourself within that shrine; freely I grant you my share of any Larith gold."

"Generous Lythande!" Beccolo taunted, while Lythande stood silent, angry because in this alien guise, skirts about her body, Blue Star hidden behind paint, she knew herself at his mercy. She longed for the comfort of her knives at her waist, the familiar breeches and mage-robe. Even the *larith* sword would have been comforting at this moment.

"And you make a pretty woman indeed," Beccolo taunted. "Perhaps the gold within the shrine is only the bodies of her priestesses; did you find, then, that gold?"

She turned a little, her hands fumbling swiftly within her pack. The sword was in her hand. But she could tell by the feel that it was the wrong sword, the one that killed only the creatures of magic, the banewolf or werewolf, the ghoul and the ghost would fall before it; but against Beccolo she was helpless, and that sword of no avail. Her hands buried in her pack, she fumbled in the folds of the bundled-up mage-robe and the hard leather of her own breeches to find the hilt of the sword that was effective against an enemy as unpleasantly corporeal as Beccolo. The Blue Star between his brows mocked her with its flare; she swept one hand over her forehead and wiped the cosmetic from her own.

"Ah, don't do that," Beccolo mocked. "Shame to spoil a pretty woman with your scrawny hawk-face. And here you are where perhaps I can make Lythande as much of a fool as you made me in yonder courts of the Temple of the Star! Suppose, now, I shouted to all men to come and see Lythande the Magician, Lythande the Shadow, here disguised as a woman, primed for some mischief in their shrine — what then, Lythande?"

It is only his malice. He does not know the law of Larith. Yet if he should carry out his threat, there were those in this town who would know — or believe — that Lythande, a man, an Adept of the Blue Star, had cheated her way into the shrine where no man might set his foot. There was no safety here for Lythande either as a man or a woman; and now she had her hand on the hilt of her right-hand blade but could not extricate it from the tangled belongings of her pack.

It would serve her right, she thought, if for this womanish folly she was entrapped here in a duel with Beccolo cumbered with skirts and disarmed by her own precautions. She had hidden her swords too well, thinking she would have leisure and the cover of night to shed the disguise!

"Yet before Lythande is Lythande again," Beccolo's hateful, mocking voice snarled, "perhaps I should try

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whether or not it is not more fitting to Lythande to put skirts about his knees ... how good a woman do you make, then, O fellow Pilgrim?" His hand dragged Lythande to him; his free hand sought to ruffle the fair hair. Lythande wrenched away, snarling a gutter obscenity of Old Gandrin, and Beccolo, snatching back a blackened hand that smoked with fire, howled in anguish.

I should have stood still and let him have his fun until I could get my sword in my hand....

Lightning flared from the Blue Star, and Lythande brought her own hand up in a warding-spell, furiously rummaging for her right-hand sword. The smell of magic crackled in the air, but Beccolo plunged at Lythande, yelling in fury.

If he touches me, he will know I am a woman. And if the secret of any Adept is spoken aloud, then is his Power forfeit. He has only to say, *Lythande, you are a woman,* and he is revenged for all time for that foolishness in the outer court of the Blue Star.

"Damn you, Lythande, no one makes a fool of Beccolo twice—"

"No," said Lythande, with calm contempt, "you do so admirably yourself." Desperately she wrenched at the trapped sword. He yelled again, and a spell sizzled in the air between them.

"Thief! Hedgerow-sorcerer," Lythande shouted at him, delaying as the sword sawed at the leather holding it in the pack, "Defiler of virgin goats!"

Only for a moment Beccolo paused; but she caught the flash of despair in his eyes. Somehow, in the careless profanity of Old Gandrin, had Beccolo delivered himself into her hands? Had the spirit of the *larith* prompted her to a curse Lythande had never used before and would never use again?

What, after all, had she now to lose, without even a sword in her hand? "Beccolo," she repeated, slowly and deliberately, "you are a despoiler of virgin goats!"

He stood motionless as the words echoed in the square around them. She could feel the voiding of Power from the Blue Star. Truly she had stumbled upon his Secret; he stood silent, unmoving, as she got the sword in her hand and ran him through with it.

A crowd was gathering; Lythande picked up her skirts without dignity, the sword in her hand along with the fold of her skirt, and ran, disappearing around a market-stall and there enfolding herself in a magical sphere of silence. The shouts and yells of the crowd were cut off in a thick, quenched, *clogged* silence, as the utter stillness of the Place Which Is Not enfolded her, a sphere of nothingness, like colorless water or dazzling fire. Lythande drew a long breath and began to shuck her borrowed skirts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now for the unbinding-spell that would return these things to the stalls of their owners, somewhat the worse of wear. As she spoke the spell, she began to chuckle at the picture of Beccolo engaged in the Secret on which he had gambled his life — for the secret spoken in careless abuse, hidden out in the open, was harmless; only when Lythande spoke it openly to his face did it acquire the magical Power of an Adept's Secret.

But not even in secret may I be a woman....

Setting her lips tight, she waved her hand and dispelled the sorcerous sphere. Once again Lythande had appeared in a strange street from thin air, and that would do her reputation no harm either, nor the reputation of the Pilgrim Adepts.

Glancing at the sky, she noticed that the time-annihilating magical sphere had cost her a day and more; Keth again stood at the zenith. She wondered what they had done with Beccolo's body. She did not care. A stream of pilgrims was winding its way upward still to the shrine of the Goddess as Larith, and Lythande stood watching for a moment, remembering the face of the young girl and the soft-spoken blessing of a priestess. Her hand felt empty without the *larith* sword.

Then she turned her back on the shrine and strode toward the ferry.

"Watch where you step, you swaggering defiler of virgin goats," a man snarled as the Adept passed in the swirling mage-robe.

Lythande laughed. She said, "Not I," and stepped on board the ferry, turning her back on the shrine of women's magic.

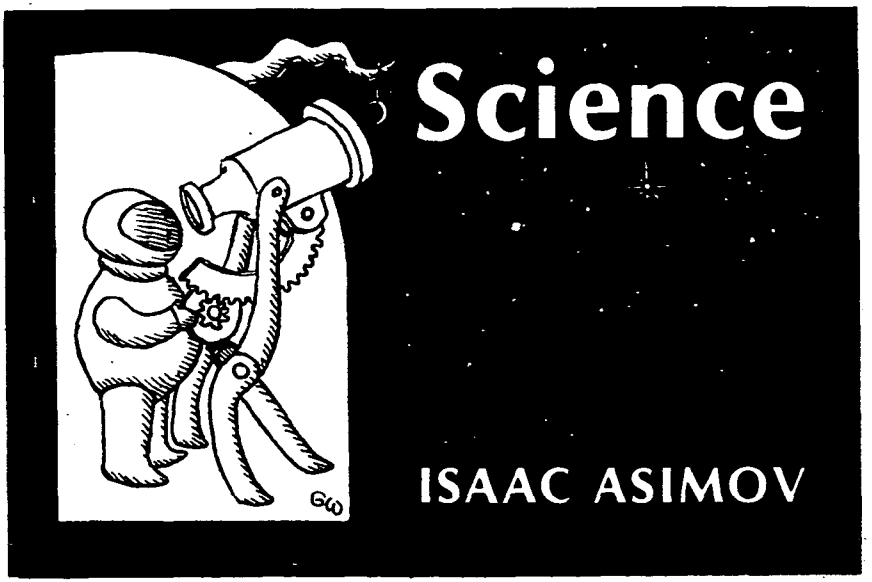
(from page 100)

your might *Streets of Fire*. Don't miss *Ghostbusters*. And prepare yourself to avoid all reviews and blandishments that will suggest you see *Gremlins*, one of the most purely evil films ever visited on the filmgoing public.

I will deal at length with each of these as soon as I blight my friendship with Stephen King.

— HARLAN ELLISON

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE DIFFERENT YEARS OF THE UNIVERSE

I've got to tell you about the only time during a warm 45-year friendship with my fellow writer, Lester del Rey, that I stopped him cold.

It's not easy. He never allows any verbal blow without an immediate counter-blow; he's never at a loss for a retort, and he never hesitates to make it, except, in my case, that once.

He and I and two other friends were in a taxi, and somehow I was on the subject of my patriarchal father and his countless moralistic admonitions to me, for he had firmly believed that only by endlessly subjecting me, in my impressionable childhood, to the teachings of the great Jewish sages, could he prevent me from losing my way in the thickets of immorality and vice.

"Remember, Isaac," he would say, in that melodious sing-song with which Jewish moral lessons were inculcated, "that if you hang around with *bums*" (the word was always emphasized strongly so as to indicate the utmost contempt and moral revulsion) "you may think you will change them into decent people, but you will *not*. No! Never! Instead, if you hang around with *bums*, they will change *you* into a *bum*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Whereupon Lester interposed instantly to say, "So why do you still hang around with bums, Isaac?"

And I replied without hesitation, "Because I love you, Lester, that's why."

That was the first and only time in my long experience with him, that Lester burst out laughing so hard he found himself unable to answer. What's more, I had two other guys in the cab (also laughing, of course) as witnesses.

I thought of that the other day when I was being interviewed by someone who said to me, "Of all the different kinds of writing you do, Dr. Asimov, what sort do you enjoy the most?"

I have been asked that many times before (I have been asked *everything* by interviewers many times before), so I didn't have to do any thinking. I said, "I most enjoy my monthly F&SF essays. I've been doing them for over a quarter of a century without missing a deadline."

The interviewer looked doubtful. "Is that because they pay well?"

"No," I said. "As a matter of fact, the word rate is lower for those essays than for anything else I write, but I'd do them for nothing, if I had to."

"But why?"

And the answer came again without hesitation. "Because I love them, sir, that's why."

And I do. It may be that there is a Gentle Reader somewhere who secretly believes that no one in the world enjoys these essays as much as he (or she) does. If so, the Gentle Reader is wrong. *I* enjoy them more.

With that, we'll continue from where we left off last month.

In last month's essay, I took various significant lengths of time — American history, the history of civilization, the history of hominids, and so on — compressed each into a year and marked off significant events (without relative distortion) along the length of the year. It gave what I thought was a dramatic notion of what happened, more accurately than in the ordinary way of dealing with dates.

The last compression I undertook was the 4.6-billion-year history of the planet Earth, made into one "Earth Year." It showed, for instance, that if Earth assumed its present shape at the opening of January 1, the fossil record in the Cambrian rocks dates did not appear until November 12, the dinosaurs became extinct on December 26, and the first hominids appeared at 5:30 P.M. on December 31, with our historical

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

records covering only the last forty-five seconds of the Earth Year.

Is there anything we can do that would cover a still mightier time-span?

Obviously, the entire Universe had a beginning with the Big Bang. The time when the Big Bang occurred can't be determined as easily or as accurately as the time when Earth (and the rest of the Solar system) assumed its present form, and there is controversy among astronomers on the matter. However, 15 billion years is a plausible figure, and it is the one (pending some good evidence to the contrary) that I generally use in my writings.

We can set 15,000,000,000 B.P. (Before the Present) as the beginning of the Universe, then, and call it New Year's Minute — the midpoint of the midnight that ushers in January 1. The present moment is the midstroke of the midnight that puts an end to the following December 31. To cover the entire lifetime of the Universe in a single imaginary "Universe Year," each day of that imaginary year (each "Universe Day") must be 41,000,000 real-years long.

As it happens, an enormous number of vitally important events that shaped the nature of the Universe took place in the first few seconds after the Big Bang, even in the first few microseconds after the Big Bang. As a result, one would inevitably miss a great deal if one tried to describe everything in a year measured in the ordinary arithmetical way. What is really needed is a logarithmic scale, and I did that sort of thing in THE CRUCIAL ASYMMETRY (F&SF, November 1981).

Nevertheless I shall stick to an ordinary arithmetical scale for the Universe Year, as I did in the various "years" of last month's essay and show what I can in that way. (I'm continuing the numbering from where I left off last month, by the way.)

Table 9 — The Universe Year

The Big Bang	January 1, 12:00 AM
Subatomic particles form	January 1, 12:00:13 AM
Hydrogen and helium atoms form	January 1, 12:10 AM
Atoms form galaxy-sized gas clouds	January 3, 10 AM
The Milky Way Galaxy forms	February 18
The Solar system forms	September 9
Life begins on Earth	October 6
First land life on Earth	December 20
First hominids appear	December 31, 9:40 PM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As you can see, the Universe went through the first eighth of its history without our galaxy, and perhaps without any galaxies. (That depends, incidentally, on which of the current versions of the Big Bang are accurate. Some recent ones postulate an "inflationary Universe," in which, after the Big Bang, there is a sudden, incredibly fast expansion, and that may mean that galaxies may have existed almost from the start. Unfortunately, I'm not sure. I have not yet managed to grasp the inflationary Universe.)

In any case, there is no doubt that the Universe existed for a long time, probably 7/10 of its existence, without our Solar system.

If it is true as some maintain (but I cannot make myself believe) that Earth life is the only life in the Universe, then the Universe went through 3/4 of its existence as a vast sterility, free even from the simplest life. (How can that be credible?)

What surprises me more, though, is that the vast duration does not reduce something as petty as human history to immeasurability. Not at all! The period during which human beings have been writing chronicles of one sort or another actually occupies about 10 Universe Seconds. (The last ten, of course.)

It might seem that by considering the life of the Universe I have run out of useful tables. What can I call on that is still longer and grander than the total life of the total Universe?

But then, length isn't all. We can find usefulness in other directions. For instance—

The Sun, with its family of planets, travels steadily about the center of the Milky Way Galaxy in a nearly circular orbit and completes one revolution in about 200,000,000 years.

Suppose we assume that the Sun's orbit has been stable, that it has not been seriously affected by stellar perturbations over its lifetime. We have no real evidence for this assumption, but there is no reason to suppose that the orbit has undergone serious changes at any time, either. And if there is no evidence either way, it makes good sense to take the simplest reasonable assumption, and we'll opt for stability.

In that case, it would mean that in the 4,600,000,000-year history of the Solar systems, there has been time for the Sun and planets to have circled the Galactic center 23 times.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Next, let's imagine some observer at a fixed point in the Galaxy (relative to its center), one from which he saw the Sun ignite and begin to shine just as it passed him. What would he see if he remained there and studied Earth each time it returned after an interval of 200,000,000 years.

If we squeezed the lifetime of the Solar system into a single "Solar System Year," then each orbit of the Solar system about the Galactic center would take 15.87 Solar System Days, and each of those Days would represent 548,000 real years. We might prepare a table that numbers Earth's formation as 0, and then numbers each following return along its orbital path from 1 to 23. The result would be as follows:

Table 10 — The Solar System Year

0 — January 1	Earth assumes its present form
1 — January 16	Chemical evolution
2 — February 1	Chemical evolution
3 — February 17	Chemical evolution
4 — March 3	Chemical evolution
5 — March 19	Chemical evolution
6 — April 4	Bacteria (prokaryotes) appear
7 — April 20	Bacteria
8 — May 5	Bacteria
9 — May 21	Blue-green algae (prokaryotes) appear
10 — June 6	Bacteria and blue-green algae
11 — June 22	Bacteria and blue-green algae
12 — July 8	Bacteria and blue-green algae
13 — July 24	Multicellular prokaryotes appear
14 — August 9	Multicellular prokaryotes
15 — August 25	Multicellular prokaryotes
16 — September 9	Multicellular prokaryotes
17 — September 25	Multicellular prokaryotes
18 — October 11	Eukaryotic cells develop
19 — October 27	Multicellular eukaryotes (plants and animals)
20 — November 12	Shellfish. Beginning of rich fossil record
21 — November 28	Land life appears
22 — December 14	Dinosaurs appear
23 — December 31	*Homo sapiens* dominate Earth

• • •

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Let me explain some points briefly. By "chemical evolution," I mean the gradual buildup of complex molecules from simple ones at the expense of various sources of energy such as solar ultraviolet, lightning, and the Earth's internal heat.

"Prokaryotes" (which I briefly mentioned last month) are simple cells that are considerably smaller than those of our bodies, for instance, and that lack internal complexity. They lack a nucleus, for instance, and their genetic equipment is distributed through the cell generally. The prokaryotes that still flourish today are bacteria and blue-green algae. The two are very much alike except that the blue-greens (which are not really algae, by the way) can photosynthesize and bacteria cannot.

"Eukaryotes" are much larger cells, with considerable internal organization, including (in particular) a nucleus. "Eukaryote" is from the Greek and means "good nucleus," while "prokaryote" means "before the nucleus." Protozoa and true algae are simple eukaryotic cells, animals and plants respectively. All multicellular organisms on Earth today (including ourselves, of course) are made up of eukaryotic cells.

Multicellular prokaryotes are little more than bacterial colonies and were a dead end. If bacteria and blue-greens survive handily today, despite the competition, it is because they occupy all sorts of niches that nothing else can or will, and because they are so incredibly fecund.

By looking at the Earth at fixed intervals, you can get a good idea of the accelerating rate of evolution. During the first five turns about the Galactic center, Earth was lifeless. During the next twelve turns, it carried nothing more advanced than prokaryotic cells.

It was not till the completion of the 18th turn, by which time over three-fourths of Earth's present age had been reached, that eukaryotic cells were developed.

But then things speed up. By the next turn, we gained the potential of a good fossil record to help us, thanks to the appearance of complex multicellular organisms with parts that fossilize easily. Another turn and the land is colonized. Still another, and the dinosaurs appear.

And then, the whole dramatic tale of the rise and fall of the dinosaurs, the rise of the mammals, and the coming of the hominids and "modern man," is all squeezed into the most recent turn of the Solar system about the Galactic center.

We can only wonder what there will be to see on the next turn, 200,000,000 years hence.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

• • •

As long as we're considering Earth's evolution from the Universe's standpoint, with talk of the Big Bang and of Galactic revolutions, let's justify the title of this essay by abandoning Earth altogether now and considering the evolution of stars (the Sun in particular) instead of that of terrestial life.

Nearly 5 billion years ago, the Solar system existed as a huge cloud of dust and gas, a cloud that may have been there ever since the Galaxy had formed billions of years earlier still. Some impulse (a nearby supernova explosion, perhaps) set the Solar system gas cloud into contraction. Its gravitational intensity increased as a result, and the contraction was further hastened. Finally, after 10 or 20 million years, the center of the cloud had contracted to a density and temperature that was sufficient to ignite hydrogen fusion. The center of the condensation "caught fire" and became a star, even while in the outer regions the smaller and, therefore, cold-surface bodies we know as the planets were forming.

After that, the Sun maintained its energy output by steadily fusing the hydrogen that made up by far the bulk of its contents into the somewhat more complex helium. The helium (denser than hydrogen) gathered at the Solar center, and this helium core grew larger and larger as ever more helium was formed and trickled down to join it.

As the helium core grew more massive, its own gravitational intensity made it condense into greater density and temperature. By the time the Sun uses up about ten percent of its total original hydrogen (something that won't happen for several billion years yet), the helium core will have grown dense enough and hot enough for helium fusion into carbon to take place.

Between the time that hydrogen fusion was initiated and the time helium fusion was, the radiational output of the Sun (or of any such star) is reasonably constant. During this period of time, the Sun, or any star, is said to remain on the "main sequence."

In the case of the Sun, it is estimated that it will stay on the main sequence for 10 billion years altogether.

Once helium burning starts, the helium core heats up tremendously and expands. It also heats the outer hydrogen envelope which also expands. The Sun grows larger and larger and its expanding outermost surface gradually cools to mere red-heat, though the expanding surface gives it a steadily increasing *total* heat, despite the cooling of the parts.

The Sun would reach its maximum volume as a "red giant" perhaps

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

1.5 billion years after helium burning had started, so that its total lifetime from ignition to red giant would be 11.5 billion years. (Naturally, the Sun will continue to exist and evolve after it has become a full grown red giant, but in this essay, we won't go further.

Other stars go through the same changes, but not necessarily at the same rate. Stars more massive than the Sun do everything more quickly. Being more massive, they have a more intense gravitational field and contract more quickly, grow denser and hotter faster, and reach ignition sooner. After ignition, they fuse their hydrogen more quickly and reach the red giant stage more quickly, too, and, for that matter, become a larger red giant. To be sure, the more massive a star, the more hydrogen it contains for fusing, but the rate of fusion goes up considerably faster than the mass of the star, so the larger the star, the shorter its stay on the main sequence.

A star three times the mass of the Sun, for instance, will complete its contraction in, perhaps, 3 million years (rather than the 20 million the Sun seems to have taken). It will be on the main sequence only a quarter of a billion years and will be a full grown red giant a few million years after that.

Suppose, then, we prepare a "Sun Year" in which the total lifetime of the Sun, from ignition to full grown red giant, is compressed into a year. Since the Sun Year would be 11.5 billion real-years long, each Sun Day would be 31,500,000 real-years long. We can chart the lifetime of the more massive stars in this way.

Table 11 — The Sun Year

Star ignition	January 1, 12:00 A.M.
Most massive stars become red giants	January 1, 12:45 A.M.
Star like Beta Centauri becomes red giant	January 1, 7:30 A.M.
Star like Achernar becomes red giant	January 3, 4:00 A.M.
Star like Sirius becomes red giant	January 16
Star like Altair becomes red giant	February 1
Star like Canopus becomes red giant	March 3
Star like Procyon becomes red giant	May 5
The Sun at its present stage	May 25
Helium burning begins in the Sun	November 12
The Sun becomes full grown red giant	December 31

• • •

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As you see, the Sun is still in its vigorous middle age, with not quite half of its useful life gone. Nor is there any need to worry about the fact that, inexorably, after helium burning begins, the Sun will grow steadily hotter so that life on Earth will become impossible. Indeed, when the Sun is a full grown red giant, it will expand till it is close enough to the Earth to heat it to a baked cinder. It may even engulf it altogether.

It should, however, be at least five or six billion years before the heat is really on, and it would take an incurable optimist to suppose that we won't have managed to find something altogether different as a means of doing ourselves in. We won't have to wait around for a heating Sun.

Even if we survive, then, by helium burning time, we will have evolved into something unrecognizable as human (though, we can always dimly hope, something better than human).

If we, or a successor species, exist when the Sun is at helium ignition, it is inconceivable that our technological level will not have reached the point where we can leave Earth easily and retreat to the outer Solar system where the Sun's newly enormous total heat will be beneficent rather than otherwise. In fact, we can be certain that long before the Sun's heat becomes a problem, humanity, or its descendants, will have transferred the scenes of its activity to planets circling other, younger stars, or to independent aritificial worlds.

It might occur to you, by the way, that if a Star like Beta Centauri works its way through the main sequence in a mere five and a half Sun Hours and is gone, so to speak, before the sunrise on the first day of the year; how can it be that Beta Centauri is shining serenely in the skies of the southern hemisphere right now?

Ah, but Table 11 is based on the supposition that a whole group of stars of various masses (but all more massive than the Sun) was ignited at the same time. This is not the case with real stars in the Galaxy about us. Beta Centauri has a total life on the main sequence of not more than 10 million years, yet it shines in the sky now because it was formed less than ten million years ago.

All stars more massive than the Sun are relative newcomers to the scene; otherwise all would have gone red giant and been in a state of collapse by now. Many spiral galaxies (including the Milky Way) are still littered with nebulas of dust and gas, and these can, under the proper conditions, condense into whole crowds of stars. There are small, intensely dark patches called "Bok globules" after the astronomer Bart J. Bok, who first called attention to them, and these may be stars

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the actual process of forming as we watch.

Just as there are stars that are more massive than the Sun and that are therefore larger, more luminous, hotter, and shorter-lived; there are also stars that are smaller than the Sun and that are therefore smaller, less luminous, cooler, and longer-lived.

The small stars make no great splash in the sky; we are much more aware of the large, bright ones. However, in the case of stars, as in the case of almost any large group of similar substances, be they galaxies, pebbles, or insects, the smaller ones are more numerous than the larger ones. For every star as massive as, or more massive than, the Sun, there are six or seven stars that are less massive than the Sun.

The smallest of the stars are cool enough to be only red hot. Unlike the red giants, the small stars do not have great size to make up for dimness of the parts. The small stars are therefore dim altogether, so dim that although they may be quite close to us, they can, even so, only be seen by telescope.

These small stars are called "red dwarfs," and they are so stingy with their energy that they last a surprisingly long time. A very small red dwarf, one just large enough to sustain a feeble nuclear fusion, can make its relatively small fuel supply last through 200 billion years on the main sequence. This means that no red dwarf has ever left the main sequence. The Universe simply isn't old enough to have worn one of them out.

Let us then set up a "Red Dwarf Year," by which I mean 200,000,000,000 years compressed into a single year (which gives us something longer than the present lifetime of the Universe — much longer), and see what the stars look like from that standpoint. Each Red Dwarf Day would, by this system, be 548,000,000 years long.

Table 12 — The Red Dwarf Year

Star ignition	January 1, 12:00 A.M.
Star like Sirius becomes a red giant	January 1, 10 P.M.
Star like Altair becomes a red giant	January 2, 8 P.M.
Star like Canopus becomes a red giant	January 3, 3 P.M.
Star like Procyon becomes a red giant	January 7, 7 A.M.
Star like the Sun becomes a red giant	January 21
Star like Alpha Centauri B becomes a red giant	February 24
Star like Alpha Centauri C becomes a red giant	December 31

• • •

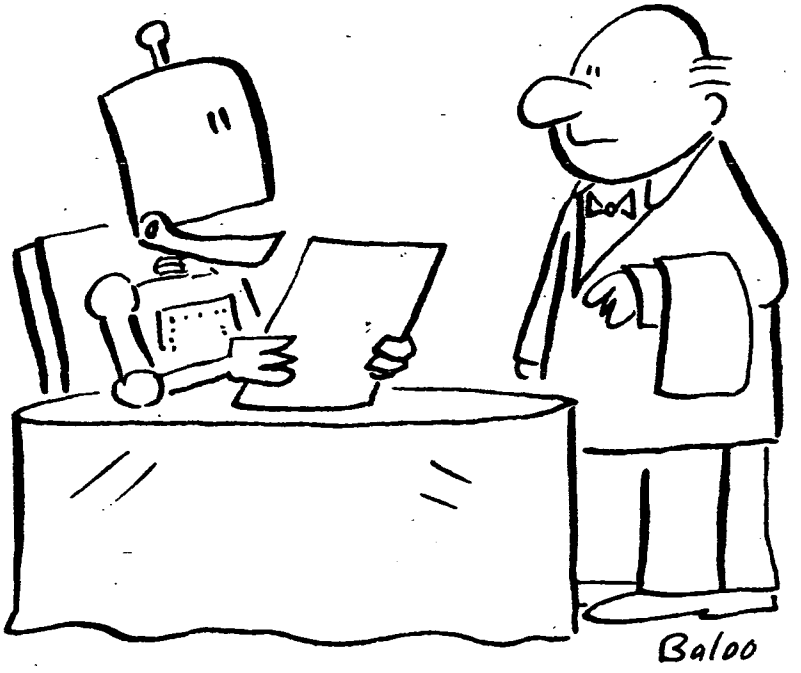
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If we could imagine a red dwarf having consciousness and watching the Universe, it might take note, rather sardonically, of all the big firecrackers that come and go in rapid flashes, while they themselves burn steadily onward in their dim, quiet way.

To be sure, new firecrackers would arise, but it is quite likely that the red dwarfs would continue to shine past them also. In fact, when the gas and dust of those various galaxies that have such clouds (many galaxies are dust free) are consumed, and the bright stars have all gone past the red giant stage and collapsed into dimness, then the Universe will flicker feebly in the light of the only normal stars left, the red dwarfs.

And eventually, if the Universe is open and is expanding forever, the last red dwarf will blink out, too, and there will be no main sequence stars left at all. Then what?

Perhaps we can take that up next month.



"I'll have the fish 'n' chips — Hold the fish."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

George Alec Effinger has observed that aliens are presented only in two lights: either saintly "E.T." types, or ugly things that want to eat us. There are other possibilities, of course, one of which is offered in the delightful story below...

The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, Everything

BY
GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

I was sitting at my desk, reading a report on the brown pelican situation, when the secretary of state burst in. "Mr. President," he said, his eyes wide, "the aliens are here!" Just like that. "The aliens are here!" As if I had any idea what to do about them.

"I see," I said. I learned early in my first term that "I see" was one of the safest and most useful comments I could possibly make in any situation. When I said. "I see," it indicated that I had digested the news and was waiting intelligently and calmly for further data. That knocked the ball back into my advisers' court. I looked at the secretary of state expectantly. I was all prepared with my next utterance, in the event that he had nothing further to add. My next utterance would be, "Well?" That would indicate that I was on top of the problem, but that I couldn't be expected to make an executive decision without sufficient information, and that he should have known better than to burst into the Oval Office unless he had that information. That's why we had protocol; that's why we had proper channels; that's why I had advisers, The voters out there didn't want me to make decisions without sufficient information. If the secretary didn't have anything more to tell me, he shouldn't have burst in in the first place. I looked at him awhile longer. "Well?" I asked at last.

"That's about all we have at the moment," he said uncomfortably. I looked at him sternly for a few seconds, scoring a couple of points while he stood there all flustered. I turned back to the pelican report, dismissing him. I certainly wasn't going to get all flustered. I could think of only one president in recent memory

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who was ever flustered in office, and we all know what happened to him. As the secretary of state closed the door to my office behind him, I smiled. The aliens were probably going to be a bitch of a problem eventually, but it wasn't my problem yet. I had a little time.

But I found that I couldn't really keep my mind on the pelican question. Even the president of the United States has *some* imagination, and if the secretary of state was correct, I was going to have to confront these aliens pretty damn soon. I'd read stories about aliens when I was a kid, I'd seen all sorts of aliens in movies and television, but these were the first aliens who'd actually stopped by for a chat. Well, I wasn't going to be the first American president to make a fool of himself in front of visitors from another world. I was going to be briefed. I telephoned the secretary of defense. "We must have some contingency plans drawn up for this," I told him. "We have plans for every other possible situation." This was true; the Defense Department has scenarios for such bizarre events as the rise of an imperialist fascist regime in Liechtenstein or the spontaneous depletion of all the world's selenium.

"Just a second, Mr. President," said the secretary. I could hear him muttering to someone else. I held the phone and stared out the window. There were crowds of people running around hysterically out there. Probably because of the aliens. "Mr. President?" came the voice of the secretary of defense. "I have one of the aliens here, and he suggests that we use the same plan that President Eisenhower used."

I closed my eyes and sighed. I hated it when they said stuff like that. I wanted information, and they told me these things knowing that I would have to ask four or five more questions just to understand the answer to the first one. "You have an alien with you?" I said in a pleasant enough voice.

"Yes, sir. They prefer not to be called 'aliens.' He tells me he's a 'nuhp.' "

"Thank you, Luis. Tell me, why do you have an al— Why do you have a nuhp and I don't"

Luis muttered the question to his nuhp. "He says it's because they wanted to go through proper channels. They learned about all that from President Eisenhower."

"Very good, Luis." This was going to take all day, I could see that; and I had a photo session with Mick Jagger's granddaughter. "My second question, Luis, is what the hell does he mean by 'the same plan that President Eisenhower used'?"

Another muffled consultation. "He says that this isn't the first time that the nuhp have landed on Earth. A scout ship with two nuhp aboard landed at Edwards Air Force Base in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

1954. The two nuhp met with President Eisenhower. It was apparently a very cordial occasion, and President Eisenhower impressed the nuhp as a warm and sincere old gentleman. They've been planning to return to Earth ever since, but they've been very busy, what with one thing and another. President Eisenhower requested that the nuhp not reveal themselves to the people of Earth in general, until our government decided how to control the inevitable hysteria. My guess is that the government never got around to that, and when the nuhp departed, the matter was studied and then shelved. As the years passed, few people were even aware that the first meeting ever occurred. The nuhp have returned now in great numbers, expecting that we'd have prepared the populace by now. It's not their fault that we haven't. They just sort of took it for granted that they'd be welcome."

"Uh-huh," I said. That was my usual utterance when I didn't know what the hell else to say. "Assure them that they are, indeed, welcome. I don't suppose the study they did during the Eisenhower administration was ever completed. I don't suppose there really is a plan to break the news to the public."

"Unfortunately, Mr. President, that seems to be the case."

"Uh-huh," That's Republicans for you, I thought. "Ask your nuhp something for me, Luis. Ask him if he knows what they told Eisenhower. They must be full of outer-space wisdom. Maybe they have some ideas about how we should deal with this."

There was yet another pause. "Mr. President, he says all they discussed with Mr. Eisenhower was his golf game. They helped to correct his putting stroke. But they are definitely full of wisdom. They know all sorts of things. My nuhp—that is, his name is Hurv—anyway, he says that they'd be happy to give you some advice."

"Tell him that I'm grateful, Luis. Can they have someone meet with me in, say, half an hour?"

"There are three nuhp on their way to the Oval Office at this moment. One of them is the leader of their expedition, and one of the others is the commander of their mother ship."

"Mother ship?" I asked.

"You haven't seen it? It's tethered on the Mall. They're real sorry about what they did to the Washington Monument. They say they can take care of it tomorrow."

I just shuddered and hung up the phone. I called my secretary. "There are going to be three—"

"They're here now, Mr. President."

I sighed. "Send them in." And that's how I met the nuhp. Just as President Eisenhower had.

They were handsome people. Likable, too. They smiled and shook hands and suggested that photographs be taken of the historic moment, so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we called in the media; and then I had to sort of wing the most important diplomatic meeting of my entire political career. I welcomed the nuhp to Earth. "Welcome to Earth," I said, "and welcome to the United States."

"Thank you," said the nuhp I would come to know as Pleen. "We're glad to be here."

"How long do you plan to be with us?" I hated myself when I said that, in front of the Associated Press and UPI and all the network news people. I sounded like a room clerk at a Holiday Inn.

"We don't know, exactly," said Pleen. "We don't have to be back to work until a week from Monday."

"Uh-huh," I said. Then I just posed for pictures and kept my mouth shut. I wasn't going to say or do another goddamn thing until my advisors showed up and started advising.

Well, of course, the people panicked. Pleen told me to expect that, but I had figured it out for myself. We've seen too many movies about visitors from space. Sometimes they come with a message of peace and universal brotherhood and just the inside information mankind has been needing for thousands of years. More often, though, the aliens come to enslave and murder us because the visual effects are better, and so when the nuhp arrived, everyone was all prepared to hate them. People didn't trust their good looks. People were suspicious of their nice manners and their quietly tasteful clothing. When the nuhp offered to solve all our problems for us, we all said, sure, solve our problems—*but at what cost?*

That first week, Pleen and I spent a lot of time together, just getting to know one another and trying to understand what the other one wanted. I invited him and Commander Toag and the other nuhp bigwigs to a reception at the White House. We had a church choir from Alabama singing gospel music, and a high school band from Michigan playing a medley of favorite collegiate fight songs, and talented clones of the original stars nostalgically re-creating the Steve and Eydie Experience, and an improvisational comedy troupe from Los Angeles or someplace, and the New York Philharmonic under the baton of a twelve-year-old girl genius. They played Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in an attempt to impress the nuhp with how marvelous Earth culture was.

Pleen enjoyed it all very much. "Men are as varied in their expressions of joy as we nuhp," he said, applauding vigorously. "We are all very fond of human music. We think Beethoven composed some of the most beautiful melodies we've ever heard, anywhere in our galactic travels."

I smiled. "I'm sure we are all pleased to hear that," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Although the Ninth Symphony is certainly not the best of his work."

I faltered in my clapping. "Excuse me?" I said.

Pleen gave me a gracious smile. "It is well known among us that Beethoven's finest composition is his Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major."

I let out my breath. "Of course, that's a matter of opinion. Perhaps the standards of the nuhp—"

"Oh, no," Pleen hastened to assure me, "taste does not enter into it at all. The Concerto No. 5 is Beethoven's best, according to very rigorous and definite critical principles. And even that lovely piece is by no means the best music ever produced by mankind."

I felt just a trifle annoyed. What could this nuhp, who came from some weirdo planet God alone knows how far away, from some society with not the slightest connection to our heritage and culture, what could this nuhp know of what Beethoven's Ninth Symphony aroused in our human souls? "Tell me, then, Pleen," I said in my ominously soft voice, "what *is* the best human musical composition?"

"The score from the motion picture *Ben-Hur,* by Miklos Rózsa," he said simply. What could I do but nod by my head in silence? It wasn't worth starting an interplanetary incident over.

So from fear our reaction to the nuhp changed to distrust. We kept waiting for them to reveal their real selves; we waited for the pleasant masks to slip off and show us the true nightmarish faces we all suspected lurked beneath. The nuhp did not go home a week from Monday, after all. They liked Earth, and they liked us. They decided to stay a little longer. We told them about ourselves and our centuries of trouble; and they mentioned, in an offhand nuhp way, that they could take care of a few little things, make some small adjustments, and life would be a whole lot better for everybody on Earth. They didn't want anything in return. They wanted to give us these things in gratitude for our hospitality: for letting them park their mother ship on the Mall and for all the free refills of coffee they were getting all around the world. We hesitated, but our vanity and our greed won out. "Go ahead," we said, "make our deserts bloom. Go ahead, end war and poverty and disease. Show us twenty exciting new things to do with leftovers. Call us when you're done."

The fear changed to distrust, but soon the distrust changed to hope. The nuhp made the deserts bloom, all right. They asked for four months. We were perfectly willing to let them have all the time they needed. They put a tall fence all around the Namib and wouldn't let anyone in to watch what they were doing. Four months later, they had a big cocktail party and invited the whole world to see what they'd accomplished. I sent the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

secretary of state as my personal representative. He brought back some wonderful slides: the vast desert had been turned into a botanical miracle. There were miles and miles of flowering plants now, instead of the monotonous dead sand and gravel sea. Of course, the immense garden contained nothing but hollyhocks, many millions of hollyhocks. I mentioned to Pleen that the people of Earth had been hoping for a little more in the way of variety, and something just a trifle more practical, too.

"What do you mean, 'practical'?" he asked.

"You know," I said, "food."

"Don't worry about food," said Pleen. "We're going to take care of hunger pretty soon."

"Good, good. But hollyhocks?"

"What's wrong with hollyhocks?"

"Nothing," I admitted.

"Hollyhocks are the single prettiest flower grown on Earth."

"Some people like orchids," I said. "Some people like roses."

"No," said Pleen firmly. "Hollyhocks are it. I wouldn't kid you."

So we thanked the nuhp for a Namibia full of hollyhocks and stopped them before they did the same thing to the Sahara, the Mojave, and the Gobi.

On the whole, everyone began to like the nuhp, although they took just a little getting used to. They had very definite opinions about everything, and they wouldn't admit that what they had were *opinions*. To hear a nuhp talk, he had a direct line to some categorical imperative that spelled everything out in terms that were unflinchingly black and white. Hollyhocks were the best flowers. Alexander Dumas was the greatest novelist. Powder blue was the prettiest color. Melancholy was the most ennobling emotion. *Grand Hotel* was the finest movie. The best car ever built was the 1956 Chevy Bel Air, but it had to be aqua and white. And there just wasn't room for discussion: the nuhp made these pronouncements with the force of divine revelation.

I asked Pleen once about the American presidency. I asked him who the Nuhp thought was the best president in our history. I felt sort of like the Wicked Queen in "Snow White." Mirror, mirror, on the wall. I didn't really believe Pleen would tell me that I was the best president, but my heart pounded while I waited for his answer; you never know, right? To tell the truth, I expected him to say Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, or Akiwara. His answer surprised me: James K. Polk.

"Polk?" I asked. I wasn't even sure I could recognize Polk's portrait.

"He's not the most familiar," said Pleen, "but he was an honest if unexciting president. He fought the Mexican War and added a great amount of territory to the United States. He saw

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

every bit of his platform become law. He was a good, hardworking man who deserves a better reputation."

"What about Thomas Jefferson?" I asked.

Pleen just shrugged. "He was O.K., too, but he was no James Polk."

My wife, the First Lady, became very good friends with the wife of Commander Toag, whose name was Doim. They often went shopping together, and Doim would make suggestions to the First Lady about fashion and hair care. Doim told my wife which rooms in the White House needed redecoration, and which charities were worthy of official support. It was Doim who negotiated the First Lady's recording contract, and it was Doim who introduced her to the Philadelphia cheese steak, one of the nuhp's favorite treats (although they asserted that the best cuisine on Earth was Tex-Mex).

One day, Doim and my wife were having lunch. They sat at a small table in a chic Washington restaurant, with a couple of dozen Secret Service people and nuhp security agents disguised elsewhere among the patrons. "I've noticed that there seem to be more nuhp here in Washington every week." said the First Lady.

"Yes," said Doim, "new mother ships arrive daily. We think Earth is one of the most pleasant planets we've ever visited."

"We're glad to have you, of course," said my wife, "and it seems that our people have gotten over their initial fears."

"The hollyhocks did the trick," said Doim.

"I guess so. How many nuhp are there on Earth now?"

"About five or six million, I'd say."

The First Lady was startled. "I didn't think it would be that many."

Doim laughed. "We're not just here in America, you know. We're all over. We really like Earth. Although, of course, Earth isn't absolutely the best planet. Our own home, Nupworld, is still Number One; but Earth would certainly be on any Top Ten list."

"Un-huh." (My wife has learned many important oratorical tricks from me.)

"That's why we're so glad to help you beautify and modernize your world."

"The hollyhocks were nice," said the First Lady. "But when are you going to tackle the really vital questions?"

"Don't worry about that," said Doim, turning her attention to her cottage cheese salad.

"When are you going to take care of world hunger?"

"Pretty soon. Don't worry."

"Urban blight?"

"Pretty soon."

"Man's inhumanity to man?"

Doim gave my wife an impatient look. "We haven't even been here for six months yet. What do you want, miracles? We've already done more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than your husband accomplished in his entire first term."

"Hollyhocks," muttered the First Lady.

"I heard that," said Doim. "The rest of the universe absolutely *adores* hollyhocks. We can't help it if humans have no taste."

They finished their lunch in silence, and my wife came back to the White House fuming.

That same week, one of my advisers showed me a letter that had been sent by a young man in New Mexico. Several nuhp had moved into a condo next door to him and had begun advising him about the best investment possibilities (urban respiratory spas), the best fabrics and colors to wear to show off his coloring, the best holo system on the market (the Esmeraldas F-64 with hex-phased Libertad screens and a Ruy Challenger argon solipsizer), the best place to watch sunsets (the revolving restaurant on top of the Weyerhauser Building in Yellowstone City), the best wines to go with everything (too numerous to mention—send SASE for list), and which of the two women he was dating to marry (Candi Marie Esterhazy). "Mr. President," said the bewildered young man, "I realize that we must be gracious hosts to our benefactors from space, but I am having some difficulty keeping my temper. The nuhp are certainly knowledgeable and willing to share the benefits of their wisdom, but they don't even wait to be asked. If they were people, regular human beings who lived next door, I would have punched their lights out by now. Please advise. And hurry: they are taking me downtown next Friday to pick out an engagement ring and new living room furniture. I don't even *want* new living room furniture!"

Luis, my secretary of defense, talked to Hurv about the ultimate goals of the nuhp. "We don't have any goals," he said. "We're just taking it easy."

"Then why did you come to Earth?" asked Luis.

"Why do you go bowling?"

"I don't go bowling."

"You should," said Hurv. "Bowling is the most enjoyable thing a person can do."

"What about sex?"

"Bowling *is* sex. Bowling is a symbolic form of intercourse, except you don't have to bother about the feelings of some other person. Bowling is sex without guilt. Bowling is what people have wanted down through all the millennia: sex without the slightest responsibility. It's the very distillation of the essence of sex. Bowling is sex without fear and shame."

"Bowling is sex without pleasure," said Luis.

There was a brief silence. "You mean," said Hurv, "that when you put that ball right into the pocket and see those pins explode off the alley, you don't have an orgasm?"

"Nope," said Luis.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's your problem, then. I can't help you there, you'll have to see some kind of therapist. It's obvious this subject embarrasses you. Let's talk about something else."

"Fine with me," said Luis moodily. "When are we going to receive the real benefits of your technological superiority? When are you going to unlock the final secrets of the atom? When are you going to free mankind from drudgery?"

"What do you mean, 'technological superiority'?" asked Hurv.

"There must be scientific wonders beyond our imagining aboard your mother ships."

"Not so's you'd notice. We're not even so advanced as you people here on Earth. We've learned all sorts of wonderful things since we've been here."

"What?" Luis couldn't imagine what Hurv was trying to say.

"We don't have anything like your astonishing bubble memories or silicon chips. We never invented anything comparable to the transistor, even. You know why the mother ships are so big?"

"My God."

"That's right," said Hurv, "vacuum tubes. All our spacecraft operate on vacuum tubes. They take up a hell of a lot of space. And they burn out. Do you know how long it takes to find the goddamn tube when it burns out? Remember how people used to take bags of vacuum tubes from their television sets down to the drugstore to use the tube tester? Think of doing that with something the size of our mother ships. And we can't just zip off into space when we feel like it. We have to let a mother ship warm up first. You have to turn the key and let the thing warm up for a couple of minutes, *then* you can zip off into space. It's a goddamn pain in the neck."

"I don't understand," said Luis, stunned. "If your technology is so primitive, how did you come here? If we're so far ahead of you, we should have discovered your planet, instead the other way around."

Hurv gave a gentle laugh. "Don't pat yourself on the back, Luis. Just because your electronics are better than ours, you aren't necessarily superior in any way. Look, imagine that you humans are a man in Los Angeles with a brand-new Trujillo and we are a nuhp in New York with a beat-up old Ford. The two fellows start driving toward St. Louis. Now, the guy in the Trujillo is doing 120 on the interstates, and the guy in the Ford is putting along at 55; but the human in the Trujillo stops in Vegas and puts all of his gas money down the hole of a blackjack table, and the determined little nuhp cruises along for days until at last he reaches his goal. It's all a matter of superior intellect and the will to succeed. Your people talk a lot about going to the stars, but you just keep putting your money into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other projects, like war and popular music and international athletic events and resurrecting the fashions of previous decades. If you wanted to go into space, you would have."

"But we *do* want to go."

"Then we'll help you. We'll give you the secrets. And you can explain your electronics to our engineers, and together we'll build wonderful new mother ships that will open the universe to both humans and nuhp."

Luis let out his breath. "Sounds good to me." he said.

Everyone agreed that this looked better than hollyhocks. We all hoped that we could keep from kicking their collective asses long enough to collect on that promise.

When I was in college, my roommate in my sophomore year was a tall, skinny guy named Barry Rintz. Barry had wild, wavy black hair and a sharp face that looked like a handsome, normal face that had been sat on and folded in the middle. He squinted a lot, not because he had any defect in his eyesight, but because he wanted to give the impression that he was constantly evaluating the world. This was true. Barry could tell you the actual and market values of any object you happened to come across.

We had a double date one football weekend with two girls from another college in the same city. Before the game, we met the girls and took them to the university's art museum, which was pretty large and owned an impressive collection. My date, a pretty elementary ed. major named Brigid, and I wandered from gallery to gallery, remarking that our tastes in art were very similar. We both like the Impressionists, and we both like Surrealism. There were a couple of little Renoirs that we admired for almost half an hour, and then we made a lot of silly sophomore jokes about what was happening in the Magritte and Dali and de Chirico paintings.

Barry and his date, Dixie, ran across us by accident as all four of us passed through the sculpture gallery. "There's a terrific Seurat down there," Brigid told her girlfriend.

"Seurat," Barry said. There was a lot of amused disbelief in his voice.

"I like Seurat," said Dixie.

"Well, of course," said Barry, "there's nothing really *wrong* with Seurat."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do you know F. E. Church?" he asked.

"Who?" I said.

"Come here." He practically dragged us to a gallery of American paintings. F. E. Church was a remarkable American landscape painter (1826-1900) who achieved an astonishing and lovely luminance in his works. "Look at that light!" cried Barry. "Look at that space! Look at that air!' '

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brigid glanced at Dixie. "Look at that air?" she whispered.

It was a fine painting and we all said so, but Barry was insistent. F. E. Church was the greatest artist in American history, and one of the best the world has ever known. "I'd put him right up there with Van Dyck and Canaletto."

"Canaletto?" said Dixie. "The one who did all those pictures of Venice?"

"Those skies!" murmured Barry ecstatically. He wore the drunken expression of the satisfied voluptuary.

"Some people like paintings of puppies or naked women," I offered. "Barry likes light and air."

We left the museum and had lunch. Barry told us which things on the menu were worth ordering, and which things were an abomination. He made us all drink an obscure imported beer from Ecuador. To Barry, the world was divided up into masterpieces and abominations. It made life so much simpler for him, except that he never understood why his friends could never tell one from the other.

At the football game, Barry compared our school's quarterback to Y. A. Tittle. He compared the other team's punter to Ngoc Van Vinh. He compared the halftime show to the Ohio State band's Script Ohio formation. Before the end of the third quarter, it was very obvious to me that Barry was going to have absolutely no luck at all with Dixie. Before the clock ran out in the fourth quarter, Brigid and I had made whispered plans to dump the other two as soon as possible and sneak away by ourselves. Dixie would probably find an excuse to ride the bus back to her dorm before suppertime. Barry, as usual, would spend the evening in our room, reading *The Making of the President 1996*.

On other occasions Barry would lecture me about subjects as diverse as American Literature (the best poet was Edwin Arlington Robinson, the best novelist James T. Farrell), animals (The only correct pet was the golden retriever), clothing (in anything other than a navy blue jacket and gray slacks a man was just asking for trouble), and even hobbies (Barry collected military decorations of czarist Imperial Russia. He wouldn't talk to me for days after I told him my father collected barbed wire).

Barry was a wealth of information. He was the campus arbiter of good taste. Everyone knew that Barry was the man to ask.

But no one ever did. We all hated his guts. I moved out of our dorm room before the end of the fall semester. Shunned, lonely, and bitter Barry Rintz wound up as a guidance counselor in a high school in Ames, Iowa. The job was absolutely perfect for him; few people are so lucky in finding a career.

If I didn't know better, I might have believed that Barry was the original advance spy for the nuhp.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When the nuhp had been on Earth for a full year, they gave us the gift of interstellar travel. It was surprisingly inexpensive. The nuhp explained their propulsion system, which was cheap and safe and adaptable to all sorts of other earthbound applications. The revelations opened up an entirely new area of scientific speculation. Then the nuhp taught us their navigational methods, and about the "shortcuts" they had discovered in space. People called them space warps, although technically speaking, the shortcuts had nothing to do with Einsteinian theory or curved space or anything like that. Not many humans understood what the nuhp were talking about, but that didn't make very much difference. The nuhp didn't understand the shortcuts, either; they just used them. The matter was presented to us like a Thanksgiving turkey on a platter. We bypassed the whole business of cautious scientific experimentation and leaped right into commercial exploitation. Mitsubishi of La Paz and Martin Marietta used nuhp schematics to begin construction of three luxury passenger ships, each capable of transporting a thousand tourists anywhere in our galaxy. Although man had yet to set foot on the moons of Jupiter, certain selected travel agencies began booking passage for a grand tour of the dozen nearest inhabited worlds.

Yes, it seemed that space was teeming with life, humanoid life on planets circling half the G-type stars in the heavens. "We've been trying to communicate with extraterrestrial intelligence for decades," complained one Soviet scientist. "Why haven't they responded?"

A friendly nuhp merely shrugged "Everybody's trying to communicate out there," he said. "Your messages are like Publishers Clearing House mail to them." At first, that was a blow to our racial pride, but we got over it. As soon as we joined the interstellar community, they'd begin to take us more seriously. And the nuhp had made that possible.

We were grateful to the nuhp, but that didn't make them any easier to live with. They were still insufferable. As my second term as president came to an end, Pleen began to advise me about my future career. "Don't write a book," he told me (after I had already written the first two hundred pages of a *A President Remembers*). "If you want to be an elder statesman, fine; but keep a low profile and wait for the people to come to you."

"What am I supposed to do with my time, then?" I asked.

"Choose a new career," Pleen said. "You're not all that old. Lots of people do it. Have you considered starting a mail-order business? You can operate it from your home. Or go back to school and take courses in some subject that's always interested you. Or become active in church or civic projects. Find a new hobby: rais-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing hollyhocks or collecting military decorations."

"Pleen," I begged, "just leave me alone."

He seemed hurt. "Sure, if that's what you want." I regretted my harsh words.

All over the country, all over the world, everyone was having the same trouble with the nuhp. It seemed that so many of them had come to Earth, every human had his own personal nuhp to make endless suggestions. There hadn't been so much tension. in the world since the 1992 Miss Universe contest, when the most votes went to No Award.

That's why it didn't surprise me very much when the first of our own mother ships returned from its 28-day voyage among the stars with only 276 of its 1,000 passengers still aboard. The other 724 had remained behind on one lush, exciting, exotic, friendly world or another. These planets had one thing in common: they were all populated by charming, warm, intelligent, humanlike people who had left their own home worlds after being discovered by the nuhp. Many races lived together in peace and harmony on these planets, in spacious cities newly built to house the fed-up expatriates. Perhaps these alien races had experienced the same internal jealousies and hatreds we human beings had known for so long, but no more. Coming together from many planets throughout our galaxy, these various peoples dwelt contentedly beside each other, united by a single common adversion: their dislike for the nuhp.

Within a year of the launching of our first interstellar ship, the population of Earth had declined by 0.5 percent. Within two years, the population had fallen by almost 14 million. The nuhp were too sincere and too eager and too sympathetic to fight with. That didn't make them any less tedious. Rather than make a scene, most people just up and left. There were plenty of really lovely worlds to visit, and it didn't cost very much, and the opportunities in space were unlimited. Many people who were frustrated and disappointed on Earth were able to build new and fulfilling lives for themselves on planets that until the nuhp arrived, we didn't even know existed.

The nuhp knew this would happen. It had already happened dozens, hundreds of times in the past, wherever their mother ships touched down. They had made promises to us and they had kept them, although we couldn't have guessed just how things would turn out.

Our cities were no longer decaying warrens imprisoning the impoverished masses. The few people who remained behind could pick and choose among the best housing. Landlords were forced to reduce rents and keep properties in perfect repair just to attract tenants.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hunger was ended when the ratio of consumers to food producers dropped drastically. Within ten years, the population of Earth was cut in half, and was still falling.

For the same reason, poverty began to disappear. There were plenty of jobs for everyone. When it became apparent that the nuhp weren't going to compete for those jobs, there were more opportunities than people to take advantage of them.

Discrimination and prejudice vanished almost overnight. Everyone cooperated to keep things running smoothly despite the large-scale emigration. The good life was avilable to everyone, and so resentments melted away. Then, too, whatever enmity people still felt could be focused solely on the nuhp; the nuhp didn't mind, either. They were oblivious to it all.

I am now the mayor and postmaster of the small human community of New Dallas, here on Thir, the fourth planet of a star known in our old catalog as Struve 2398. The various alien races we encountered here call the star by another name, which translates into "God's Pineal." All the aliens here are extremely helpful and charitable, and there are few nuhp.

All through the galaxy, the nuhp are considered the messengers of peace. Their mission is to travel from planet to planet, bringing reconciliation, prosperity, and true civilization. There isn't an intelligent race in the galaxy that doesn't love the nuhp. We all recognize what they've done and what they've given us.

But if the nuhp started moving in down the block, we'd be packed and on our way somewhere else by morning.

Coming next month

New stories by Hilbert Schenck, Lucius Shepard, Barry N. Malzberg, John Brunner, Rudy Rucker and many others. Plus "CV" a new novel by Damon Knight. Use the card insert in this issue to enter your subscription at the special rate of $13.65 for one year (12 issues).

Fantasy & Science Fiction, Cornwall, CT 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 1984 catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

SCIENTIFANTASY SPECIALIST: Books, magazines. 20¢ stamp for catalog. Gerry de la Ree, Cedarwood, Saddle River, NJ 07458.

LARGE VARIETY OF SF hardcovers, paperbacks, and magazines for sale. Reasonable prices, free catalog. Gary Van Court, P.O. Box 46896, Seattle, WA 98146-0896.

SOFT BOOKS, 89 Marion Street, Toronto, Canada M6R 1E6. Howard Lovecraft, Arkham, Necronomicon, etc. bought/sold. Catalogues issued.

SEND 25¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

WE PAY TOP PRICES for quality SF 1st ed.'s. Fantasy Archives, 71 8th Ave., NY 10014.

SPECULATIVE FICTION hardcover first editions. Catalogs issued. DMK BOOKS, 22946 Brenford, Woodland Hills, CA 91364.

SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, MYSTERIES. Paperbacks at reasonable prices. Free catalogs. The Village Bookshelf, 746 Amherst Rd., N.E., P.O. Box 708, Massillon, Ohio 44648. (216) 833-5666.

SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, OCCULT catalogue. Rare, out of print, small press. Free. Sangraal, 189 23 St., Brooklyn, NY 11232.

PROOF JESUS NEVER EXISTED! Scholarly booklet proves Josephus created fictional Jesus. Gospels. $4.00 — Vector, Box 6215-F, Bellevue, WA 98008.

FOREIGN EDITIONS OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Copies of French, German, Spanish, Japanese and Swedish editions available at $2.50 each, three for $7.00. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY Catalog, O-P 1st Edition Hardcovers. OTHERWORLDS, 23834 Wendover, Beachwood, OH 44122.

BOUGHT, SOLD, TRADED, SF&F hardbounds, pulps, digests. Send 2 stamps for gigantic 15,000 item catalog. Graham Holroyd, 778 Spencerport Rd., Rochester, NY 14606.

MOONSTONE BOOKCELLARS, INC. 2145 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20037. (202) 659-2600. Science Fiction, Fantasy and Mysteries. Special Orders Welcome!

OUT-OF-PRINT Books Found. Send Wants. Booklook, Dept. F, 51 Maple Ave., Warwick, NY 10990.

1000's of SCIENCE FICTION, HORROR, OCCULT paperbacks, hardcovers. Free catalog. Lamira, Box 12093, Dept. 86, Baltimore, MD 21281.

THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION and Fantasy is found in my catalog of pulps, digests, paperbacks, and hardcovers. Copy free upon request. Collections also purchased. Will travel for larger accumulations. Ray Bowman, Box 5845F, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

FOR SALE, SF and Fantasy books. Periodic lists issued. Large catalog to be issued in the fall. We quote from want lists. Free search service. The Book Treasury, 1535 E. Broadway, Long Beach, CA 90802. (213) 435-7383.

65,000 SF and Mystery paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines in stock. Free catalogs. Pandora's Books, Box F-54, Neche, ND 58265.

Do you have something to advertise to sf readers? Books, magazines, typewriters, telescopes, computers. space-drives, or misc. Use the F&SF Market Place at these low, low rates: $10.00 for minimum of ten (10) words, plus $1.00 for each additional word. Frequency discount: 10% for six consecutive insertions, 15% for twelve consecutive insertions. Send copy and remittance to: Adv. Dept., Fantasy and Science Fiction, P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SLADEK's "Xoids" $1.00 postpaid: Drumm, POB 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226.

HARDCOVER SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY. Reasonable Prices. Free Lists. Norman Syms, 8 Broadmoor Vale, Upper Weston, Bath, Avon, England BA1 4LP.

AN INDEX to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1949 through 1983. Indexed by author and cover artists. Only $4.95 postpaid. Ray Bowman, Box 5845, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

SCIENCE FICTION MAKES for many successful self-published books. Get personalized assistance publishing it yourself. Lowell Moss Creative Services, 760 Market #1036F, San Francisco, California 94102.

CLOTHING

F&SF T-SHIRTS. Navy blue with original magazine logo imprinted in white OR: Red shirt with blue logo. Sm, med, large, extra-large. $6.50 each. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

MISCELLANEOUS

ESP LABORATORY. This new research service group can help you. For FREE information write: Al G. Manning, ESP Laboratory, 7559 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046.

COMPUTERS. GET RICH with your microcomputer. Free details. Info, Box 25545-F, Honolulu, HI 96825.

COMPUTERIZED ASTROLOGICAL natal chart. Include exact date of birth, time, and geographical location. Novel shower or birthday gift. To receive your personal graphic horoscope and a free description of the chart, send $10 and an SASE to XERES MICROSYSTEMS, Dept. FSF, 2153 Cullom, Chicago, IL 60618.

INVENTIONS, IDEAS, TECHNOLOGY WANTED! Industry, presentation/national exposition. 1-800-528-6050. X831.

20% OFF FANTASY GAMES AND MINIATURES. SEND $1.00 for catalog. The Fantasy Apothecary, Post Office Box 19302, Orlando, Florida 32814.

PERFUMES — BELOW WHOLESALE! Famous fragrances. Save 80% — sample $2.00. Catalog 50¢. Ariva, POB 26154, Prescott, AZ 86312.

Thor and Odin live! Discover Viking religion. Wotan, 3125 19th St. 297AD, Bakersfield, CA 93301.

FANTASY, SF, AEROSPACE & MOVIE POSTERS. Giant picture catalog $1.00. Space Station, Dept 2F, 14 Palfrey St., Watertown, Mass. 02172.

SATAN'S HOPE: For those who dare meet the Devil! Box 353, Victoria Station, Montreal H3Z 2V8.

PERSONAL

SINGLE? Meet that special person! Call DATELINE — free: 800-451-3245.

LONELY? Nationwide club for both sexes. Send stamp. Exciting, Box 324, Ontario, Calif. 91761.

RECORDS/TAPES

GREAT RADIO PROGRAMS! Science-Fiction, Mystery, Adventure. Free list cassettes. Rare Radio, Box 117-F, Sunland, Calif. 91040.

TRAVEL

GHOSTS! Unique tour to England in search of ghosts/spirits. Escorted by psychic researcher. Free brochure: 800-227-3800 extension "ICTS" (24-hour toll-free service).

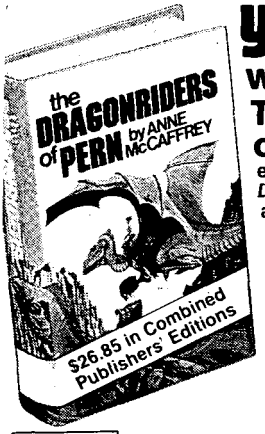
CORRECTION

"What Makes Us Human," by Stephen R. Donaldson (August 1984) should have included a credit line acknowledging that the story was an excerpt from the forthcoming book BERSERKER BASE, edited by Fred Saberhagen.

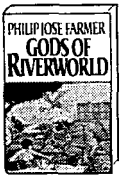
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

YOURS FREE with membership

The DRAGONRIDERS of PERN One mammoth edition including all 3 novels: *Dragonflight, Dragonquest,* and *The White Dragon.*

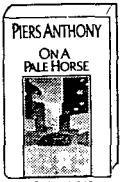


†1016 Spec.ed.



0505 Pub.ed.$14.95

★6262 Pub.ed.$14.95



1156 Pub.ed.$12.95

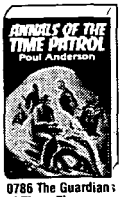
††0984 Spec.ed.

0976 Pub. ed.$13.95

0661 Pub.ed.$12.95

1073 Pub.ed.$11.95

1032 The Storm Lord; Anackire. Spec.ed.



0786 The Guardians of Time; Time Patrolman. Spec.ed

1131 Spec.ed.

0752 Elric of *Melniboné; The* Sailor on the Seas of Fate; The Weird of the White Wolf. Spec.ed.

And take 4 more for $1 WITH MEMBERSHIP

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

*Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some.
Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.

†Copyright © 1984 By Paramount Pictures Corporation STAR TREK Is A Trademark Of Paramount Pictures Corporation Registered In The U.S. Patent And Trademark Office All Rights Reserved ††©1983 by Paramount Pictures Corp. All rights reserved

How the Club Works:

You'll receive your 4 books for only $1 (plus shipping and handling) after your application for membership is accepted. We reserve the right to reject any application. However, once accepted as a member, you may examine the books in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days at Club expense. *Your membership will be cancelled and you'll owe nothing.*

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come,* describing the coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, *prefer an Alternate, or* no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need take only 4 Selections or Alternates during the coming year. You may resign any *time thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as* long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $4.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions—up to 65% off. The Club offers more than 300 books to choose from. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

Dept. RR-129, Garden City, N.Y. 11530

Please accept my application for membership. Send me the 4 books whose numbers I have indicated below plus my FREE book and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular low Club prices during the coming year and *may resign any time thereafter.* The FREE book will be mine to keep whether or not I remain a member. SFBC offers serious works for mature readers.

FREE BOOK #2543	1.	2.	3.	4.

Mr.
Ms. _____
(Please print)

Address _____ Apt. # _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

If under 18, parent must sign. _____

The Science Fiction Book Club offers its own complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Offer slightly different in Canada. 86-S233J

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

YOURS FREE with membership

The DRAGONRIDERS of PERN

One mammoth edition including all 3 novels: *Dragonflight*, *Dragonquest*, and *The White Dragon*.

★0414 Spec.ed.

0489 Pub.ed.$14.95

THE DARK TOWER
THE GUNSLINGER
THE DRAWING OF THE THREE
THE WASTELANDS
THE SUBSCRIPTION EDITION